

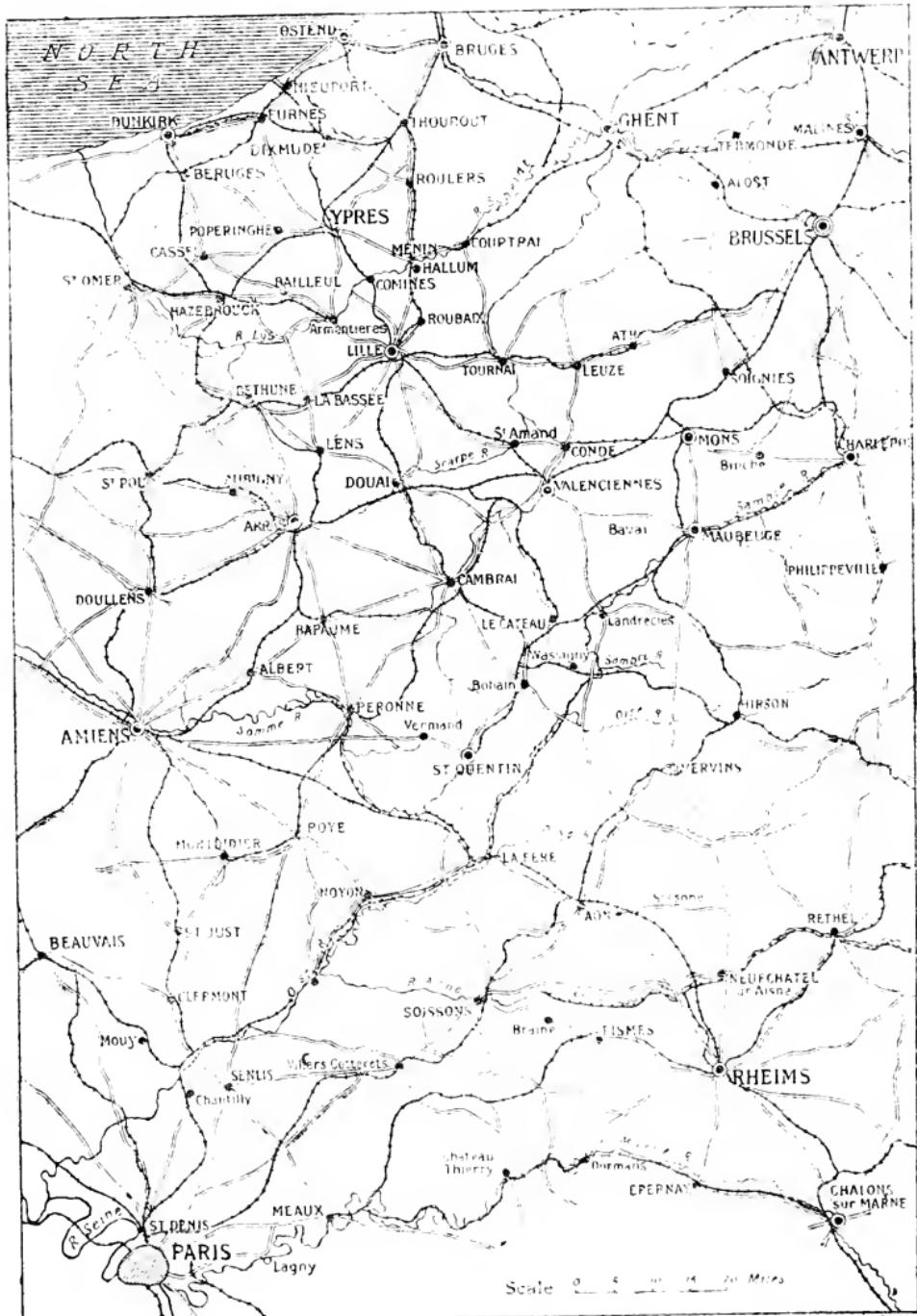
# HOW TO SEE THE BATTLEFIELDS

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CAPT. ATHERTON FLEMING



HOW TO SEE  
THE BATTLEFIELDS



Territory over which the B.E.F. fought.

# HOW TO SEE THE BATTLEFIELDS

BY

CAPT. AERTHERTON FLEMING

*“Daily Chronicle” Special Correspondent (1914)*

*With Fourteen Maps*

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## FOREWORD

THIS book is not, by any means, to be regarded in the light of an attempt to describe any particular period, or phase, of the Great War. It is simply an endeavour, and a very crude one, to set before the public, in as concise a manner as possible, a certain amount of information which has been collected in the course of over four years' campaigning in France and Flanders.

There are many thousands of people who will want to see the ground over which the fighting took place; some, no doubt, out of pure curiosity, others with a much more pathetic object in view. To the latter their journeyings will be more in the nature of a pilgrimage than a mere round of sightseeing, and should the information contained herein prove of use to these pilgrims, I shall feel more than amply repaid for my trouble.

A. F.

*Wiston, July, 1919.*



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# HOW TO SEE THE BATTLEFIELDS

## SECTION I

### **Nieuport—Ypres—Bailleul**

IF a line could be drawn from the North Sea coast near Nieuport in Flanders, down through Dixmude, round Ypres and Armentières, between Béthune and La Bassée, in front of Arras, and through the Somme country, Bapaume and Péronne, on to Roye, Noyon, and then Soissons, along the Chemin-des-Dames to Berry-au-Bac—a line varying from five to ten miles in width, and at some places, notably the battlefields of the Somme, bellying out to twenty or more—this swath of land would define, fairly accurately, the whole of that area which we used to call “the Western Front.” To all intents and purposes the line, so far as British and Colonial troops are concerned, ceases to interest us farther east than Berry-au-Bac. Until the Second Battle of the Marne, in 1918—the decisive turning-point of the Great War—British troops had not occupied the Chemin-des-Dames line—except for a very short period during the 1914 retreat—before it was handed over by the French to the 9th Corps of the British Army, composed of certain divisions which

had been badly knocked about and were sent there for a rest.

For the tourist who wishes to investigate the whole of the battle line from the North Sea coast to the Swiss frontier, there are, of course, several historic battlefields on the French fronts to be visited: Verdun, for instance, possibly the bloodiest of the lot; the town of Rheims, or what is left of it; the famous St. Mihiel salient, and the Vosges. I do not know any part of the line east of Berry-au-Bac, therefore I won't attempt to describe it. When all is said and done, I think the average Britisher, male or female, will be more interested in that section of the Western Front which was held by the British Army; just as the average French man or woman would flush with pride at the mention of Verdun and be comparatively unaffected by the mention of Ypres—it is but natural. Thomas Atkins had heard of Verdun, but exactly where it was did not interest him very much; it was "Somewhere in France," and so long as he was not "going into the blinkin' line there" he didn't think any more about it.

What I am going to attempt to describe is that swath of battlefield which is sacred to our own troops; how to see the most interesting part of the line, the places to start from, the roads to use, and, to the best of my ability, the objects of interest to be seen at various points of the tour.

There are three ways of seeing the Front—possibly a fourth. The first is a walking tour, and to the tourist with plenty of time on his hands, this, in

my opinion, is the ideal method; the second is by train to various centres and then on foot to the points of interest within easy reach; and the third is by motor-car. I mentioned a possible fourth, and that, there is no doubt, will be the inevitable "conducted tour."

Calais, that famous port which the ex-Kaiser intended to use as a jumping-off ground from which to attack England, will now be used by the tourist as a jumping-off ground from which to view the scene of the War Lord's discomfiture. Instead of "Nach Kales" the signpost is now pointing in the opposite direction; the writing thereon reads "To Berlin." Instead of going to Berlin, however, we take the train to Nieuport; even for the "foot-slogger" this will be the best way to get to the beginning of the line; there will be plenty of walking to do later.

The quaint old Flemish town, Nieuport, with its Templars Tower, now but a mass of rubble, the result of four years of fighting, is to all intents and purposes the beginning of the stupendous trench system which stretches to the Swiss frontier. For some considerable time in 1914 the Allied line followed the eastern bank of the Yser river from the sea to Nieuport, which it included then, turned sharply southwards across the canal, following the Ypres—Nieuport railway embankment, passed in front of Ramscapelle, and then on to Dixmude. With steady forward pressure, almost yard by yard the line was advanced until Lombartzyde was taken, and our front line was just outside Westende.

The pushing forward of trenches in the sandy area between the canal and the sea, and the fall of Lombartzye, enabled the Allies to advance out of the flooded area between Ramscapelle and the river, and take up a new position some little distance on the other side of the Yser. The course of the fighting may be followed down through Pervyse to Dixmude, where one may gaze upon what is left of the once beautiful parish church of St. Nicholas, which was noted for its flamboyant rood loft. From Dixmude one cannot do better than follow the line of the Yser Canal, which runs through to Ypres. Some of the hardest fighting in the war took place along this canal, and the battle swayed backwards and forwards over this much-coveted position for many long months, always leaving the balance in the favour of the Allied troops. Yet the cost was heavy, as can be seen by the numerous wooden crosses in the immediate back areas. Across the canal to Merckem and then by the road eastwards brings us to Houthulst Wood, which proved an expensive obstacle to us several times after the capture of Langemarck, when the British attempted to open up the Ypres salient to the north. Pilkem and Boesinghe, Het Sas and Steenstraate—what is left of them—are all close to one another, and are mentioned later. Boesinghe marks the extreme point reached by the enemy when they settled down to trench warfare in 1914.

Through Poelcapelle we get to Passchendaele Ridge. Passchendaele itself there will be some difficulty in finding, although there ought to be a bit of

# NIEUPORT - YPRES - BAILLEUL.

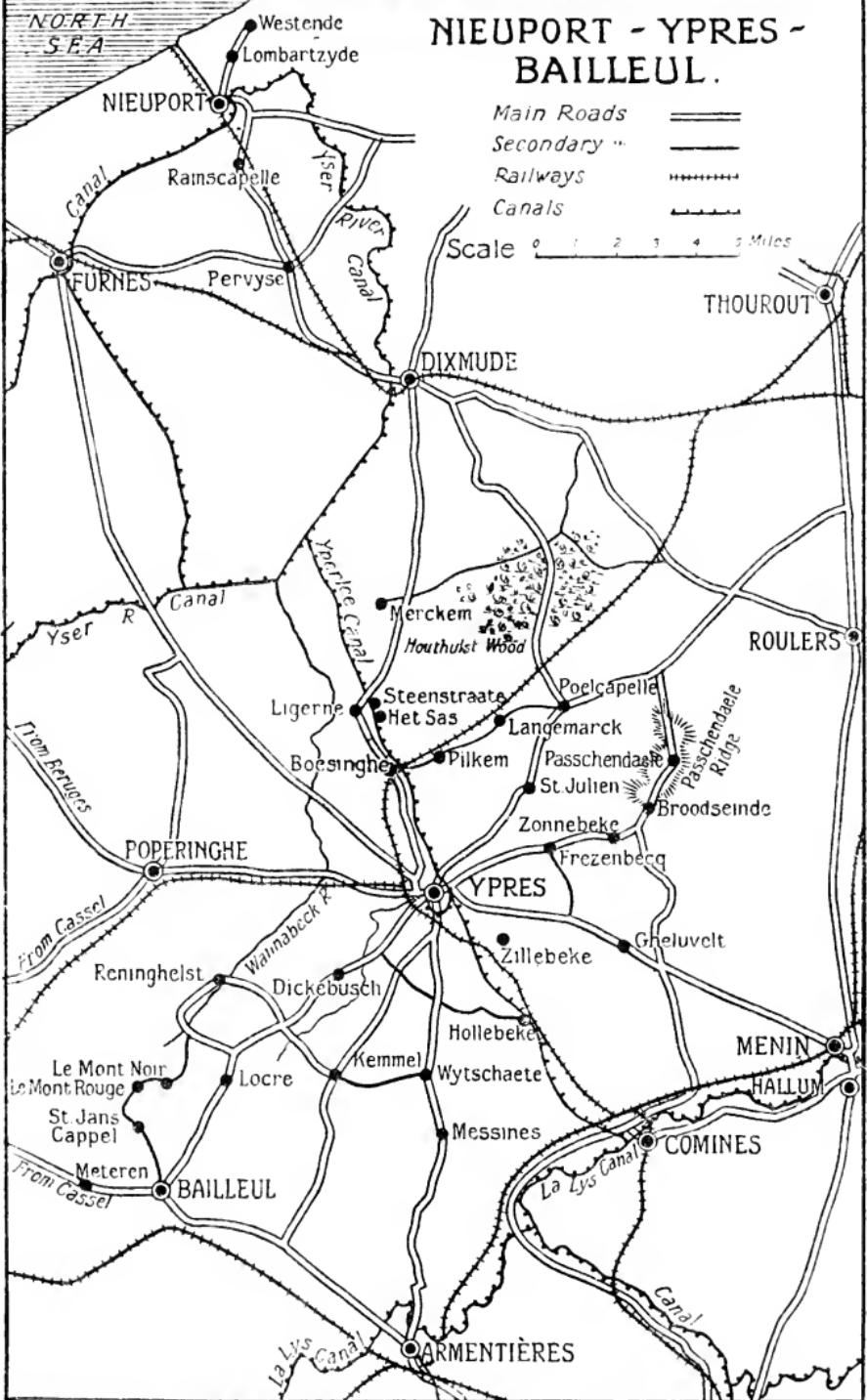
Main Roads

Secondary ..

Railways

Canals

Scale 0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles



the church left; but it is worth visiting, if only to show some slight mark of respect to the thousands who fell there in the last weeks of 1917. I think the very limit of human endurance was reached during the Passchendaele "stunt," for if ever man had a foretaste of hell it was surely there. There are many who have reason to remember this place. When you go there try and realise what it must have meant—and cost—to storm the ridge with the weather conditions at their very worst, with no cover worth mentioning, and the enemy fighting all he knew.

From Passchendaele—unless the traveller wishes to go farther westwards into what was German territory during the four years of war—the best road is through Broodseinde and Zonnebeke. If you had any friends or relations in the Gunners, ask them what they thought of Zonnebeke as a health resort; and a little farther on, when you come to the heap of rubbish which marks the site of Frezenbecq, turn sharp left and cut into the Ypres—Menin road about halfway between Hooge and Gheluvelt, both of which places are noted battlefields. From Hooge a direct road leads to Ypres, and—well, I am not going to try and describe the indescribable, so that I must limit myself to a few remarks anent a place which is to the British nation what Verdun is to the French.

Let us suppose that the traveller has come straight from the coast with the idea of visiting Ypres, and that a halt has been called at Cassel, an excellent vantage point or "O Pip" from which the surrounding country may be viewed for miles.

From the windows of the principal hotel in this town one may obtain the first sight of Ypres—a white patch on the plain—the ghost of a town that four short years ago was the pride of the Belgian people. For Ypres, far more than Ghent or Bruges, had retained its medieval character, possibly owing to the fact that it had died, commercially, with the hand-weaving industry. As I write the news has just arrived that the Belgian Government has decided not to rebuild the town. I for one do not see what else it could do. One can restore and repair ancient buildings which have been badly damaged by shell fire, but this is not a case of mere restoration or repair. Look at the crumbling heap of stones which now barely marks the base of what was once St. Martin's massive belfry; one Gothic arch is all that is left of the nave of the church, and all the old houses of the Square, with their quaint Spanish architecture, have been destroyed; whole streets have disappeared under masses of stones and rubbish. Who could reproduce the stone carving of the old Cloth Hall? In the first place, there were eighty windows—if my memory serves me rightly—and they were all different! I agree with Emile Cammaerts, who says that “Ypres could only be rebuilt by the men who erected her walls six or seven centuries ago.” The town should be left as it is, untouched by aught but nature, surrounded by what is left of its walls—a monument to German *Kultur* and a constant reminder to mankind of the value of the written word of man.

For over four years of fierce fighting “the

salient of Ypres" has proved that British soldiers can hold their own in the face of appalling odds and under conditions which cannot possibly be realised by those who have not actually taken part in the fighting. Bad conditions there have been—very bad sometimes—on many other parts of the front, but nothing ever was so bad as the line of defence in front of Ypres. Ask any old infantryman what he thought of the salient—and get out of his way before he replies. He wants to forget it. Ypres was occupied by the British on October 14, 1914, and since then proved to be the scene of many a bloody fight and an insuperable obstacle to the Kaiser's march on Calais.

From October 16 to November 11, over which period raged the First Battle of Ypres, the Allied forces by attacking and counter-attacking, and, to put the "tin hat on it," as Tommy would say, by finally routing the Prussian Guards, within a few hundred yards of our artillery positions, effectually demonstrated that the British soldier still possessed that stubborn, dogged pluck for which he has been famous ever since Britain has been a nation.

The Second Battle of Ypres began on March 16, 1915, and lasted till May 17. On Thursday, April 22, the enemy launched his first gas attack—on that day German *Kultur* reached its zenith, and in the following days the Canadians reached theirs. No words of mine could describe the sufferings of these gallant Colonials, of how they held on, hour after hour, with grim tenacity in spite of the poisonous fumes—and

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yet it is but another episode in the history of Ypres.

During this first gas attack severe fighting took place west of St. Julien, and here Lieut.-Colonel Burchall, the very gallant commander of the 4th Canadian Battalion, met his death whilst rallying his men. It should be remembered that at the period of which I write there was absolutely no known means of protection from gas—gas-masks had not even been thought about—and it surely does not need a vivid imagination to realise what a truly terrifying ordeal the first gas attack must have been for those troops who had to undergo it. Death from gas poisoning is a most horrible thing. Nothing could be worse for the *moral* of troops than the sight of men lying about writhing and twisting in the throes of slow suffocation. And yet these Canadians held on long enough to decide the issue of the battle. West of St. Julien heavy fighting was taking place up to the Yperlee Canal near Boesinghe, and across the canal the enemy was advancing from Steenstraate on Ligerne and was throwing bridges across the canal at several points.

The position of affairs in Ypres in October, 1914, from the inhabitants' point of view, had been black enough in all conscience, but the further exhibitions of German *Kultur* in the shape of poisonous gases decided matters, and they evacuated the town in a body. Men and women who had stood the nerve test of many weeks of high-explosive shelling gave in at last—the limit had been reached. They streamed out of the town along the road to Poperinghe. Carts full

of bedding, furniture and household goods—carts drawn by horses, oxen, dogs, and very often with only a man between the shafts, and a woman or child pushing behind—blocked the road for miles and proved a very great hindrance to the arrival of the necessary reinforcements which were being rushed up with all possible speed. As an instance of forced marching the Lahore Division covered thirty-three miles between 1 o'clock on April 24 and 10.30 a.m. the next day.

At Grafenstafel, north-west of Ypres, on April 25, 1915, the Durham Light Infantry were subjected to a very heavy gas shell bombardment, and had to fall back to a position on the bank of the Wannabeck. On Monday, the 26th, our Indian troops of the Lahore Division received their baptism of gas in the attack on St. Julien, which they did in concert with General Riddell's Brigade. In this attack all but three Indian officers became casualties, and Jemadar Mir Dast, of the 58th Coke's Rifles, won his V.C., and in the afternoon General Riddell fell.

From this time onwards until May 11 the battle raged almost unceasingly between Steenstraate and Frezenberg until the Germans, evidently "fed up" with their lack of success, heavy losses, and our stubborn defence, started shelling Ypres with incendiary shells and set the town on fire in many places. On May 15 the little village of Het Sas, near Steenstraate, was occupied by the Zouaves, after they, helped by Algerian troops, had worked their way forward, and left piles of German dead behind them.

The neighbourhood of Het Sas and Steenstraate is the graveyard of many hundreds of Huns.

The battlefield of the “salient” has been the scene of so many Homeric fights that it is extremely difficult to advise the visitor what to see and what to miss. The only satisfactory way to “do” this district is to walk it—or ride if a horse can be obtained. There is not a square yard between Langemarcke and Hollebeke that is not noted for some episode or other. Pilken certainly ought to be seen.

This village, at the opening of what I think is now termed the Third Battle of Ypres, on July 31, 1917, was a position of some considerable strength, and was defended by a wide and deep trench, in which concrete was largely used to strengthen the trench shelters. In the village itself many of the shell-shattered houses had been fortified with concrete, and some were so strong that they had resisted the shock of bursts from 8-inch and 9.2-inch heavy howitzer shells. Farther to the south of the village one may trace the remains of the German posts of Gallwitz Farm, Mackensen Farm, and Zouave Farm. These posts proved tough obstacles to the attacking forces, as they were very strongly fortified and manned. A German prisoner told me after the engagement that he did not think it possible for any infantry troops to survive in front of Mackensen Farm. As this prisoner was one of the garrison of the place he probably knew what he was talking about. To the Welshmen belongs the credit for capturing these formidable defences, and having gained knowledge

by bitter experience, they did not attempt a frontal attack, but reduced the garrison by a series of out-flanking movements, which were completely successful.

After a visit to the "salient," or possibly before it, I should advise the tourist to make a tour of the immediate back areas before leaving the district to go farther south to Bailleul and Armentières. A run through Dickebusch and Reninghelst to Kemmel (from Kemmel Hill a magnificent view of the battle-field may be obtained), and then back to Locre. From Locre, instead of taking the direct road to Bailleul, go by the road over Mont Rouge and Mont Noir to St. Jans Cappel, and I am sure the Mayor's Secretary, the worthy M. Sagary, will be only too pleased to welcome visitors and give any details required relating to the surrounding district.

I had the very good fortune to be billeted at M. Sagary's house for some little time during a rest period, and cannot thank either M. or Mme. Sagary enough for their kindness to me during my stay there. St. Jans Cappel was one of the few villages in the district which had totally escaped the Hun "strafing" up to the time of the "Kemmel stunt" in April, 1918, and then the Hun, with his usual preference for sacred edifices, punctured the church tower with one shell, and followed the matter up by landing one or two more in the streets of the village, much to the surprise and indignation of the villagers, who, after four years of safety, had hoped to finish the war "unchipped," so to speak. Before leaving the district I should

recommend a visit to the famous Mont-des-Cats Monastery, which is within easy reach of St. Jans Cappel.

To Bailleul is but a short journey. This town suffered comparatively little damage up to 1918; it was bombed occasionally and shelled intermittently, but very little real damage was done. I think the Hun always had a sort of idea that Bailleul would make a very good headquarters when the "rush to the coast" project was a little more developed, and, therefore, he refrained from damaging it more than he could help. In 1918, however, during the heavy fighting around Kemmel, a very large number of shells were sent into the town, and the Grand Place, with the Hôtel de Ville, was practically razed to the ground, and a repetition of the hand-to-hand street fighting which took place in both Bailleul and Meteren in 1914 again happened in both these places in 1918 before the Allies finally retook the town. Bailleul was not by any means a pleasant town even in pre-war days; but during the war it was looked upon by the troops as a haven of rest—a place in which to buy food and postcards, and the thousand and one things the British soldier spends his pay on. One could get an omelette and a bottle of quite good wine for a few francs at the Faucon, and the familiar meeting-place known as "Tina's" used to be the resort of all officers who were able to get down the line for a few hours' respite from the Flanders mud and Boche high-explosives. One could at least get dry outside and wet inside at "Tina's," a pleasant

reversal of the usual conditions in the line, and if the atmosphere was so thick that one could hardly breathe it was a welcome relief for the short time it lasted. There used to be a big hospital in Bailleul, and just outside the town will be found a British cemetery, where many of our boys who have crossed the Great Divide are laid to rest.

A well-known and cheery figure in Bailleul during the short time he was in the vicinity was the late Vernon Castle, who was with a crack squadron of the R.F.C., whose aerodrome for a considerable time lay just outside the town. Vernon Castle at the piano in "Tina's" was worth hearing, and one was always sure of a jolly evening. Another celebrity was the officer in charge of the Officers' Clothing Depot A.O.D., who, as a rule, used to be shelled out once a fortnight, and who used to take a grim delight in showing visitors how "the last one" had just missed him by a few inches.

As a typical example of German humour it may interest the reader to know that during the short occupation of Bailleul by the enemy in 1914 they—as a joke—liberated the lunatics in the asylum and allowed them to wander over the country. Many of these poor miserable creatures were afterwards found dead by the roadside or in the woods, where they had fled in their terror. Can one imagine a more hideous kind of humour?

Bailleul was captured by the British Third Corps on October 14, 1914, and remained in our hands until the German offensive early in 1918.

Before leaving the northern area the visitor, especially if motoring, should go to St. Omer, which was for a long time the General Headquarters of the British Armies in France, and which from time to time was severely bombed by the German night bombing squadrons. It was in the town of St. Omer that Lord Roberts died on November 14, 1914, during a visit to the Indian troops, and the house in which he died can be pointed out by any inhabitant. There were several fairly large hospitals in the town, and in the barracks might have been found the A.S.C. (M.T.) School of Instruction, where a very large number of rankers received their "course" before obtaining a commission, and were licked into shape by one Captain Jarred, aided by a pocket-book containing all the latest stories, again aided by an absolutely unique knowledge of where to dine, wine or be entertained. Those who wish to make St. Omer a base cannot do better than put up at the Hôtel du Commerce in the rue Henri-Dupuis, and there is also the inevitable Hôtel de France in the Grande Place. St. Omer is a great place for convent schools, and is also very interesting historically.

In all these back area towns and villages will be found traces of British camps and billets, and the visitor, unless he be an expert linguist, need not have any French, as most of the inhabitants, and especially the younger fraternity, can speak quite good English, and are very proud of the fact. It is the type of English that "Tommy" has taught them, and in some cases will be found rather weird, for Tommy

is somewhat blunt and to the point, and his phraseology and mannerisms have been picked up intact by the quick-witted French youngsters. It used to amuse me very much to listen to some young subaltern painfully and haltingly trying to explain to "Madame" the fact that he wanted to purchase eggs and milk for the mess, an effort which very often ended in the complete exasperation of both parties and the departure in high dudgeon of a highly flushed youth, sans eggs, sans milk, sans everything. Thomas Atkins, on the other hand, has no trouble with the language; he simply rolls up to "Madame" and the conversation is somewhat as follows:

"Bongjoor, mother."

"Bon jour, m'sieu—comment ca va?"

"Trays beens—got any doo-lay?"

"Oui, m'sieu."

"Bong—and a couple o' oofs"—holding up two fingers.

"Bien, m'sieu—une minute," and away trots "Madame," returning presently with a bottle of milk and a couple of eggs; the necessary money passes, and the transaction is completed in about as much time as it takes to describe it.

## SECTION II

### Armentières—Béthune—Arras

Alternative recommended routes from the coast to Armentières :

- (1) *From Calais*—to Les Attaques—Ardres—Nordausques—St. Omer—Hazebrouck—Bailleul—Armentières. (52 miles approximately.)
- (2) *From Boulogne*—to St. Omer (a splendid road) and then as above.
- (3) *From Dunkirk*—to Bergues—Wormhoudt—Cassel—Bailleul, then as in (1). (36 miles approximately.)

FOR those who are making a complete tour of the line, the most interesting road to Armentières from Bailleul is through Neuve Eglise to Ploegstraat—or “Plug-street” as Tommy used to call it—the scene of many a sanguinary struggle. Armentières was occupied by British troops of the 3rd Corps on October 17, 1914, the enemy having evacuated the town on the previous day.

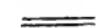
Before the war Armentières was a prosperous manufacturing town, with about 28,000 inhabitants, otherwise it was of little interest, and is of less now, except as a very much battered evidence of another stumbling-block in the pathway of the march to Calais. The enemy for weeks on end, sometimes, refrained from shelling the place, and the inhabitants—those who remained—did a very good trade with

the troops. Thence we go through Fleurbaix to Laventie, and then over the famous Neuve Chapelle battlefield, the scene of a "victory" which cost us over 12,000 casualties; 190 officers and over 2,350 other ranks were killed here in three days, 359 officers and 8,174 men wounded, and 23 officers and 1,723 men missing. This was the price we paid for a gain of 1,200 yards on a front of 4,000 yards. I cannot see why we call the Battle of Neuve Chapelle a victory, considering the fact that our troops were successfully prevented from gaining their main objective, the Aubers Ridge, and thus obtaining a footing on the road to Lille. However, it is not my job to criticise—I merely point out the places of interest, and Neuve Chapelle may certainly be considered to come into this category. It may even have a more than usually pathetic interest to some.

Leaving Neuve Chapelle, follow the road down to Richebourg-St. Vaast and Richebourg l'Avoue to Festubert, Givenchy, and Cuinchy. One may pass over the old front lines between this latter place and Auchy-L<sup>e</sup> Bassée, and so cross the main Béthune—La Bassée road. Turning to the left along this road takes us past the "Railway Triangle"—well known to the Gunners—the station, and so on into the town, the heart of the "Black Country" of France, which is very aptly described by "Eye Witness" as follows: "It is mainly an industrial region, and, with its combination of mining and agriculture, might be compared to our Black Country—with Fenlands interspersed between the coal mines and the factories. In

# ARMENTIERES - BETHUNE - ARRAS.

Main Roads



Secondary "



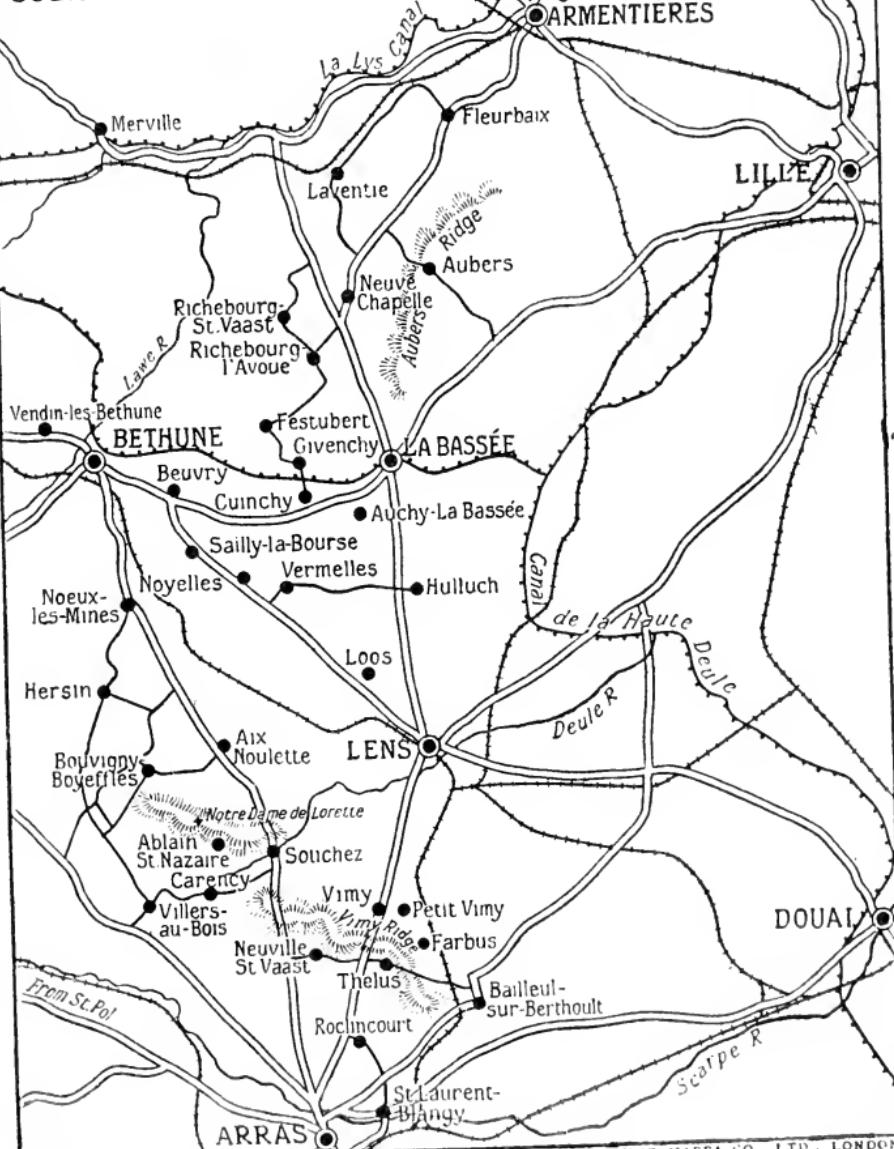
Railways



Canals



Scale 0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles



some direction the villages are so close together that this district has been described as one immense town—of which parts are in some places separated by cultivation, and in others by groups of factories bristling with chimneys. The cultivated portions are very much enclosed, and are cut up by high, unkempt hedges and ditches."

From the visitor's point of view, Béthune is a much more interesting place than La Bassée, and instead of taking the main road back into Béthune I would advise a detour through Hulluch (reminiscent of Loos in September, 1915) and Vermelles, the scene of a gallant and successful French attack on the Château de Vermelles, and also—in the grounds of the Brewery Château—our old 9.2 howitzer positions for the Loos battle. In Vermelles, not very far from the cross-road in the centre of the village, is a British cemetery, the resting-place of many of the officers and men who died of wounds in the C.C.S. just opposite. There was also, for the battle of Loos, a dressing station at La Rutoire Farm, a little farther out.

From Vermelles we pass on to the main Béthune—Lens road, and then through Noyelles, Sailly-la-Bourse, and Beuvry to Béthune. As the town is entered one passes the six cross-roads, known in the old days as "Charing Cross," and a most unhealthy corner it used to be, as its present condition will testify. The enemy made a practice of "strafing" this district fairly thoroughly, evidently with the idea that our reinforcements and relief troops must use some of the roads—and so they did for a time. But it

did not take long for the authorities to size the position of affairs up, and "Charing Cross" was given a wide berth, with the result that very little damage was done by the frequent shelling except to the neighbouring property. I never could understand why Béthune station suffered so little. For three years it was used almost constantly by our troops, for entraining and detraining supplies, leave men and reinforcements, and during that time it was never really badly shelled or bombed. Béthune was a great place for "behind the line" amateur theatricals, and some very excellent shows were staged in the little hall on the Vendin road by that versatile band composed of all ranks—and all units—who styled itself "The Shrapnels."

Like Bailleul, Béthune was to the hungry, thirsty and mud-soaked man down the line for a rest, an oasis in the desert, and the café in the Square was the meeting-place of many, while the Hôtel de France in the Marche aux Poulets provided a meal that could only be equalled in Paris—until the enemy either shelled or bombed the proprietors out of their house—I do not remember which. Even then, however, the doors were not closed for long, and although the big dining-room was put out of action, yet a certain number of meals were served in a smaller room at the back. The thoughts of many officers will go back gratefully to the old place for one thing at least, and that was the possibility of obtaining a real hot bath in a room all to oneself, with plenty of boiling water and a clean towel—all, if I remember rightly, for

Frs. 1.50. Until the beginning of the big enemy offensive in 1918 Béthune had not been badly knocked about when one considers its proximity to the front line; but after March, 1918, the town suffered very badly, and was, I believe, evacuated *en bloc* by the inhabitants for a time.

Just outside the town lies Vendin-les-Béthune, on the road to Choques, which for a long time was the headquarters of the 1st Corps, 1st Army. Vendin is noted for two things—first of all its mine, in which H.R.H. the Prince of Wales took such an interest; and secondly, for the most comfortable billet it has been my good fortune to occupy during the whole of my term overseas. Any visitor to the district cannot do better than call upon the Veuve Degrugillier in the estaminet next to the saddler's shop on the corner of the Annezin cross-road. There can be obtained an excellent omelette, accompanied by a bottle of really good wine, rounded off by a cup of coffee and a glass of brandy of a kind that only madame can supply. All these things can be procured at a very low price, while madame herself is a regular storehouse of information in connection with *la guerre*. A thoroughly good-hearted Frenchwoman, she could not do enough for any British soldier—be he officer or private—who happened to have the good fortune to be billeted in the vicinity.

Leaving the Béthune district, the choice of two routes is presented—one the direct road through Noeux-les-Mines and Aix Noulette to Souchez, and the other viâ Noeux-les-Mines, Hersin, and on to

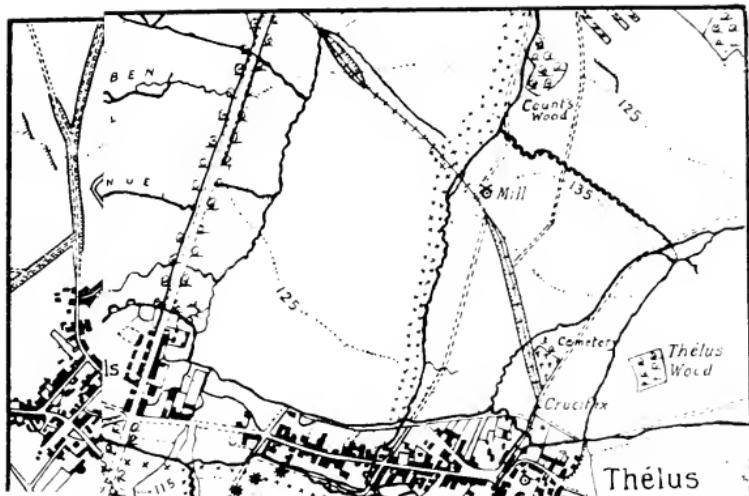
Coupigny Hill, from which a magnificent view of the surrounding country is obtainable on a clear day. The view at night from the top of this hill during a "strafe" was indescribably fine; one could see the flashes from every enemy gun, and even the streaks of fire from rifles and machine-guns; this, combined with a display of fireworks in the form of *Vèry* lights and all other kinds of star shells, made the scene weirdly beautiful. Coupigny Hill sticks up like a huge molehill in the midst of the surrounding plains, and one could see for miles into the country occupied by the Boche. In the daytime, and with the aid of a good pair of field-glasses and a map, it is possible to trace the fighting line from south of Lens to well north of Béthune.

From Coupigny we make for Bouvigny-Boyeffles—watch the roads in this village, they are very confusing—and then on to Aix-Noulette. Here the main Arras road is again encountered, and a little farther along the road goes over the eastern end of the Lorette Ridge, and enters what was once the village of Souchez. Next to Verdun, I think the fighting round this area—that is, at *Nôtre Dame de Lorette*, Souchez, and Carency—holds a very high place in the estimation of the French people. As to its ferocity, the huge French cemetery at the station near Villers-au-Bois can testify. Carency and the surrounding area witnessed General Pétain's triumph, and was the scene of a torrential bombardment from the French batteries. The maze of trenches in this district must be seen to be believed; 20,000 shells

rained upon the town of Carency alone and over 300,000 fell upon the area round about.

From Carency to La Targette, on the main Arras road, the Germans had constructed a line of defence known as the "White Works." These entrenchments may be traced eastwards to Neuville St. Vaast and then southwards to "The Labyrinth"—a system of fortified entrenchments which the enemy considered to be absolutely impregnable, and which, to quote the special correspondent of the *Morning Post*, contained every species of death-dealing device known to science, including numbers of gas and inflammable liquid engines. "Underground tunnels coupled with mines complete with small fortresses containing guns. . . . In a maze one constantly turns corners to meet blank walls of hedge. In 'The Labyrinth' such blank walls are death-traps, and from their subterranean refuge bodies of the enemy are liable to appear to the rear of the advancing attackers. 'The Labyrinth' is linked up by underground tunnels to Neuville St. Vaast. . . ."

In addition to the intense bombardment to which the Carency sector was subjected, no fewer than seventeen mines, containing over twenty tons of explosives, were fired. The craters are well worth seeing, and looking upwards towards the road from the dip in which the town of Carency is located the ground displaced by the tremendous explosions gives the effect of a small range of hills. The fighting in this district took place in May, 1915, and the German casualties were put down at over 60,000. I can well believe

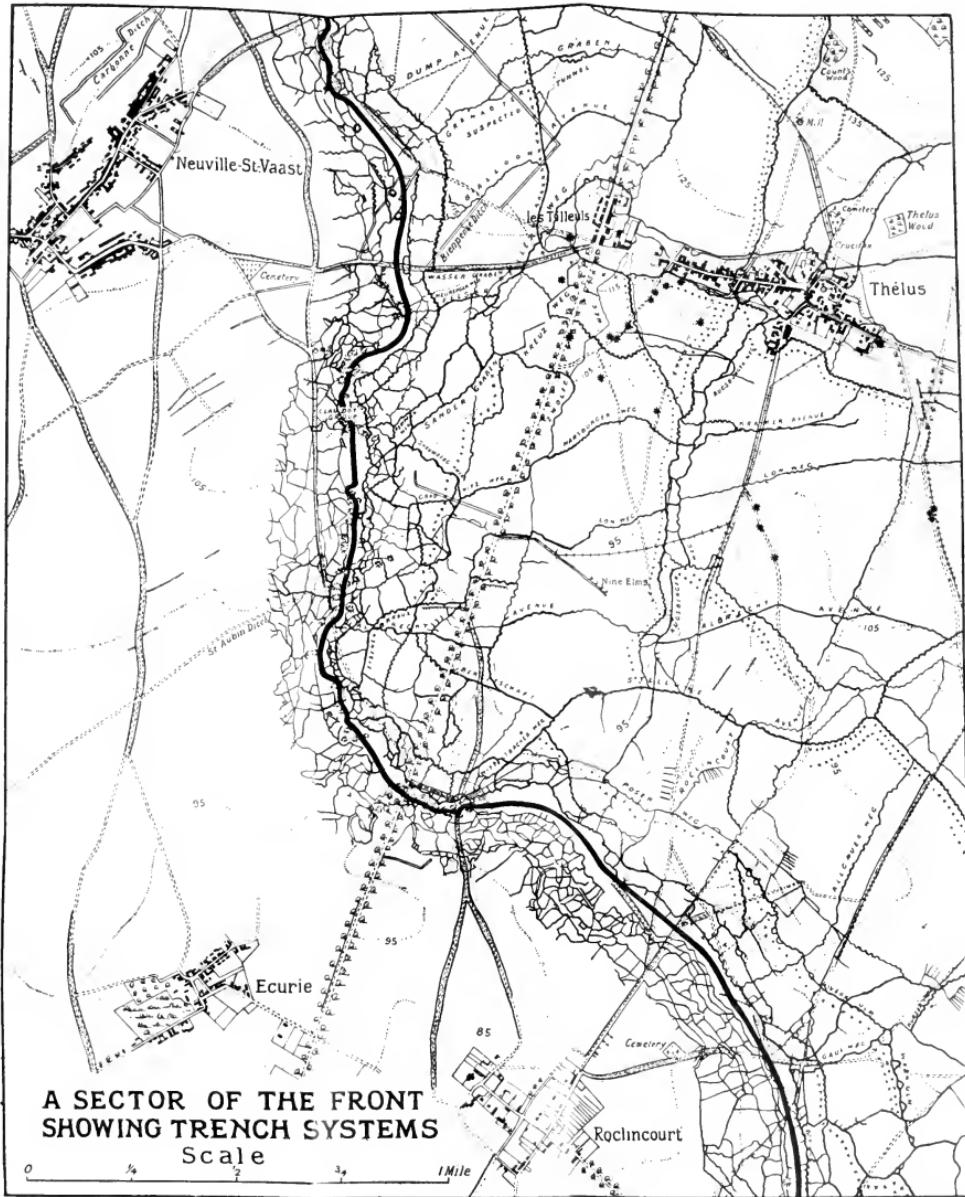


of the Dominion of Canada. Through Neuville St.

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The black line ————— divides the Allied and German lines.



it, as when the British took over this area in early 1916—February, I believe—on the slope on each side of the town and in the town itself amongst the ruins, in the trenches and underground tunnels and cellars dead bodies were everywhere. Some sort of an attempt in many cases had been made to bury them, I admit, but the rain had washed away the meagre covering of soil and exposed the bodies to view. What the weather began the rats completed. To this place, when the British took over that sector, came various howitzer batteries, and as the early part of 1916 was quite warm and springlike, I can assure my readers, as one who arrived in Carenny attached to a certain 8-inch battery, that the place was little better than a huge cesspit. Never have I seen such rats, or such numbers of them, as there were in the Carenny sector. The place was literally alive with them; the only thing they could not manage to penetrate was corrugated iron. The only part of one's kit that was safe was the shrapnel helmet, and I verily believe they tried to eat the paint off that.

As an example of the intensive burrowing system of defensive works, there is nothing on the whole front to compare with "The Labyrinth," and it is very interesting to compare the enemy method of making his trenches in 1915 with his later ideas, as exemplified in the Hindenburg and similar lines.

It would be a pity to leave the district without paying a visit to the famous Vimy Ridge, which, so I have been informed by a Canadian, is now part of the Dominion of Canada. Through Neuville St.

Vaast and across the main Arras—Lens road to Thelus, then work north to Petit Vimy, and from there to Vimy proper. A thorough examination of the surrounding district will well repay the trouble entailed. There was a regular network of strong points, trenches and wire covering the Vimy Ridge, the highest point of which was Hill 145, just north-east of Vimy. All the eastern slope of the Ridge and the villages of Bailleul-sur-Berthoult, Farbus, Petit Vimy, the plateau and the woods were very strongly defended. Two huge tunnels, known respectively as the Prinz Arnauld and Volker, had been cut through the Ridge to enable reinforcements and supplies to pass safely from the eastern to the western systems of defences. Everything that German ingenuity could suggest had been utilised to make the position impregnable. Nothing, however, is impossible to Canadian troops when they are thoroughly roused, and on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, at 5.30 a.m., after an intense bombardment, and in the middle of a severe storm—our usual weather luck—the gallant Canadians followed up the barrage, and in less than an hour had climbed the slippery heights and gained the plateau. The whole of the German first line, with the exception of the northern end of the Ridge, then fell into our hands.

While the fight was proceeding on the slopes of Hill 145, the concealed entrance of a tunnel suddenly burst open and column after column of Huns were poured into the battle. They managed to retake a part of their lost front line, but the “Byng Boys”



were not done yet, and after a most desperate and bloody fight, which lasted until late at night, they kicked the Hun out of it again. The next day, April 10, the Canadians had managed to complete the conquest of the Ridge by finally dislodging the enemy from their redoubts on Hill 145, at the northern end. During the early morning of April 9 our Scottish and North Country troops had been doing excellent work at the southern end of the Ridge, operations which resulted in the capture of 3,500 prisoners, a Brigade General and his Staff, 25 guns, and a few other odds and ends. The district between Ro clincourt and Bailleul-sur-Berthoult was the scene of this disaster to the Hun arms, and on both sides of the road from Arras to Bailleul may be seen the remains of the defence works which were smashed up by our artillery fire.

Take the cross-country road from Ro clincourt over the road leading from Arras to Bailleul-sur-Berthoult and on to St. Laurent-Blangy on the Arras—Douai road, go straight across the road, and a little farther on turn sharply to the right, and you will eventually arrive in the Place de la Gare, Arras. It was from one of the top windows of the Café des Voyageurs that I saw the first shell land in Arras in 1914. Many, many thousands of shells have fallen on the beautiful old city since that day, leaving it battered and desolate. Arras first fell into German hands on September 15, 1914. Worthy successors to the Vandals who sacked the town in 407 A.D., they ate and drank of the best they could find, although little actual

damage was done to the town as a whole. The Crown Prince and his satellites, with the Citadel as their headquarters, held a prolonged and disgusting orgy of drunkenness. In one of the rooms of the banqueting hall I saw—and photographed—a heap of wine bottles which, at a moderate estimate, numbered some 4,000, the contents of which had gone to assuage the mighty thirst of the all-conquering Hun.

For a few days only—let it be recorded—did they stay in Arras, and during those few days a son of the House of Hohenzollern rested from his labours at the *Hôtel de l'Univers*. Very apropos was it not? Still, mine host Duret, of the hotel, informed me that the Prince, in addition to behaving in a very un-Hunlike manner whilst in residence, actually paid for his food and rooms, thus confirming the worthy man's idea that rumour for once did not lie, when she gave it forth to the world that the Hohenzollerns were insane.

A well-known resident in the town was M. Peulbeuf, the contractor, who in his little two-seater car performed miracles of valour and endurance in bringing away the wounded from the line to the hospitals in those early days of the war. If he has survived and is back again, a more interesting man, or one who knows more about the town and its vicissitudes would indeed be hard to meet.

To the west side, on the low ground below the ramparts, is the cemetery, which contains many graves, both French and British. I saw it last in August, 1918, and it is beautifully tended and cared for.

One of the most interesting features of Arras is its system of caves and subterranean passages. In these underground refuges many hundreds of the inhabitants lived through the whole period of the war. A huge mass of crumbling masonry is all that is left of the magnificent *Hôtel de Ville* belfry. Begun in the year 1501, it was a splendid example of Hispano-Flemish architecture, and drew many thousands of art-lovers to the town. Everybody has, of course, heard of the famous Arras tapestries.

The first shell landed in Arras on October 6, 1914, at five minutes past nine in the morning. This was the beginning of a deliberate bombardment of the *quartier* of the *Hôtel de Ville*. The bombardment was renewed each day on the 7th, 8th, and 9th, by which time the body of the *Hôtel de Ville* was partially destroyed, though the tower was almost uninjured. Arras is now a mere shell, another ghost of a town, and it is heartbreaking to see the ruin of the Grande Place and Petite Place, and the remains of shady colonnades so Spanish in their architecture.

During the whole period of the war a news-sheet, *Le Lion d'Arras, Journal de Siège*, was produced regularly. I have No. 28 before me as I write. Its heading depicts the town in flames, whilst a lion rampant holds aloft a flag blazoned with the town arms, with the exhortation beneath, "Pour la Citie. Pour la Patrie, tenir!" Well and nobly have they held—and suffered!

Arras was twice in German hands, and twice were they severely booted out. In both cases the occupa-

tion of the town by the enemy lasted but a few days. All you British people who visit Arras now that the war is over, ponder well what it must have meant to stay in that town for four years of war, and thank God for your island home and the Navy that preserved it! Possibly you will go away with a somewhat fuller understanding of the burden which the French people are called upon to bear, for Arras is but one of many ruined towns, and by no means the greatest. 1870 and 1914—twice in forty years has the fair land of France been laid waste by the Hun. Can you wonder that she wants to cut the claws of the beast now that the chance has come? Marshal Foch was wise in his generation when he decided on the Armistice, and the German delegates wise in theirs when they accepted unconditionally. Had the French poilu been constrained to fight his way over the German frontier, there might have been one or two debts repaid with interest.

Crossing the Place de la Gare from the station one proceeds along the Rue Gambetta, passing the Post Office on the left and then coming to the Hôtel du Commerce on the right-hand side of the street. Battered and splashed by shrapnel balls, yet this place for many months was a real haven of rest for many thousands of officers and men out of the line for a temporary rest. Every time I visited the hotel it was full of hungry officers, who, somehow or other, managed to find a square meal and a bottle of wine or beer, at a fairly reasonable price. In the big dining-room most of the windows were shattered,

and pieces of canvas or linen, or even boards, took the place of glazing. A hole in the ceiling in the far corner showed where a shell had come through, wrecking the rooms above and furrowing the plaster in the room below with countless shrapnel tracks. Yet, during all the time that Arras was at all inhabitable, and even during some of the bombardments, waitresses could be found in the *Hôtel du Commerce* bustling around to feed the hungry soldier. It is a matter of very great credit to the proprietors of the hotel that, in spite of the almost unbelievable difficulties in obtaining supplies, there never was any attempt at profiteering.

Although there were several hospitals in the town itself, the authorities realised that the situation was too close to the line for anything like real safety, and the majority of the casualties in the Arras area were taken farther back to the Casualty Clearing Station, which was situated on the Arras—Doullens road near Beaumetz. A very large burial ground will be seen on the right-hand side of the road coming from Arras. At Bellevue, farther along the road on the way to Doullens, may be seen the site of a large aerodrome, which for many months was the headquarters of some of the finest aerial fighters.

Doullens, if the tourist feels inclined to go there—and I shouldn't be very keen myself unless I were motoring—is not a very interesting place. The inhabitants of this little market town, which has not suffered at all during the war, with the exception of an occasional bomb, must have done very well out

of the British soldier, judging by the prices one had to pay when one made a very occasional visit on a borrowed car, or lorry-hopped it into the town just to see what it felt like to get some decent food once more or to buy a copy of the day-before-yesterday's paper. Doullens, safe behind the line, was not nearly so hospitable as poor battered and scorched old Arras.

If any of my readers want to explore the Arras front and are unable to find accommodation in Arras itself, I should recommend St. Pol, which is a very nice little town, or it is just possible that some sort of place might be found in Aubigny, which lies half-way from Arras to St. Pol—a little off the road to the right. All the back area of the Arras sector will well repay investigation, if only to show to the uninitiated what a tremendously huge organisation modern warfare demands.

Near Dainville, on the main road, will be noticed large ammunition sidings, which were specially constructed for the Arras offensive in 1917, and one can easily picture the busy scene of loading and unloading heavy ammunition—thousands and thousands of rounds being absorbed by the greedy lorries and borne off to the guns up in the battery positions. Pitchy black nights, rain and sleet, heaving, cursing and sweating drivers, lorries getting ditched and pulled out again, horse transport trotting past in the darkness, a regular orgy of petrol vapour, noise and steam from sweating beasts. Chaos, apparently; yet through it ran a steady current of organisation

which gradually ate up the chaos, and quietly and unostentatiously supplied everybody's wants, so that in the course of some few hours silence reigned over the dump, and all that remained was one or two tired and dirty officers, some ditto orderlies, and the inevitable sentry marching with measured tread up and down the road. All was over until the next ammunition train came in and the lorries came back from the battery positions to load up once more. And still the ceaseless roar of the guns in their positions some few miles farther forward, and the vivid electric blue flashes which threw everything into bold relief !

The enemy tried very hard to hit the Dainville dump, even going to the extent of throwing over 15-inch shells, but they did not manage to do more than make one or two fairly large holes in the vicinity. Wanqueton, which lies west of Dainville through Warlus, was less fortunate, for they managed to get the dump there, though whether with gunfire or aeroplane bombs I do not remember.

Achicourt, which is almost a suburb of Arras, and Agny, which joins on to Achicourt, are places worth spending a little time in. Both suffered very badly in the early days, and there is a fairly large burial ground in the churchyard of Agny. A part of the church still remains, and one of the bells used to be mounted in a wooden framework at the end of the street to give gas attack warnings. The ground round here has been fought over several times, as the maze of trenches will show.

Few operations during the Great War were planned with as much thoroughness as the Arras—Vimy offensive of 1917. Haig was confronted with a problem which was in many ways similar to that which the Allied Armies had to solve in 1813. Guns solved that problem, and guns—in such numbers that would have given a gunner nightmare merely to think of before the war—proved the solution of the Arras—Vimy battle. Against the perpetual rain of heavy projectiles the Boche line crumpled up, massive concrete defences, reinforced with steel rods, were shattered to atoms. The steel cupolas garrisoned by machine-gunners, which were to play such a great part in the defence of the area, were simply death-traps. Our infantry made short work of these when they got to close quarters, and the shell-shocked and nerve-racked survivors of the garrison were in the majority of cases quite ready to surrender to the summons of a rifle butt banged on the rear doorway. It must have been absolute hell inside one of these things during our bombardment.

From aerial photographs and visual observation, a large relief model of the Vimy heights and their vicinity was constructed as a preliminary to the offensive. On this model every detail of the surrounding country was accurately set out, even to road tracks, craters, and wire entanglements. I understand that the Mayor of Vimy, who was intimately acquainted with the ground, lent his valuable assistance to the constructor, and was able to correct many

details which had not been quite clear to the observers.

The roads on the east and south-east side of Arras are not in the best of condition—main roads, of course, excepted—but I am afraid that the earnest student of the battlefield area will miss very much if he sticks only to those routes which are in good condition. “Foot-slogging” is the only way to see the real points of interest. Make an early morning start, with some sandwiches and a bottle of wine in a haversack, a good stout pair of boots, and the fixed determination to see as much as you can in the time, even if you do finish the day weary and dirty, and you will see more in a few hours than I could describe in two volumes. You will see a lot more of the country than Tommy did, because you will be able to put your head up without being sniped at. Both sides of the Arras—Vis-en-Artois road should be examined. On the one side will be found Tilloy and Telegraph Hill, on the other—some distance farther east—Monchy-le-Preux. South of Tilloy there used to exist an irregular labyrinth of trenches named “The Harp” by our soldiers. Farther south—near Neuville Vitasse, in an almost direct line from Tilloy over Telegraph Hill, was a network of barbed wire entanglements known as “The Egg.” It was against such defences as these that our tanks did such good work, especially in the capture of Telegraph Hill and “The Harp,” while our aerial fighters once more demonstrated to the enemy our superiority in the air. Battles in the air between quite large formations were

very frequent during the day just before our attack, which was arranged for April 9, 1917. On this day, as might have been expected, the weather was at its worst, just at the time when we wanted it fine, and later in the day changed from drizzling rain to a snowstorm.

## SECTION III

### **The Somme and Cambrai**

#### THE SOMME

THE First Battle of the Somme began on the morning of July 1, 1916, and the British line attacked a front of approximately twenty miles—from Gommecourt to Montauban. The line on the opening day of the battle was roughly as follows: Gommecourt was approximately one mile inside Hun territory; Hebuterne about the same distance behind; and our line, which then ran almost due south across the Serre road in front of Beaumont Hamel, then swung westward over the Hamel—Miraumont road, the Albert—Achiet-le-Grand railway, the River Ancre, and just in front of Hamel. Do not confuse this latter place with Beaumont Hamel, already mentioned. South again in front of Thiepval, then to the Leipzig salient, in front of Ovillers-la-Boiselle. Then over the main road from Albert to Bapaume, through the eastern end of La Boiselle proper, just in front of Fricourt, westwards and slightly south of Mametz, a little more than a mile south of Montauban.

Gommecourt is being preserved by the French Government as a national monument, and is well worth seeing, though many of the trench workings are very grass grown and almost obliterated. About

the only thing which in any way marks the previous existence of this village is the site of the Château de Gommecourt, which is noticeable only owing to the fact that it is the biggest heap of stones in the neighbourhood.

Thiepval, which is just over six miles away, as the aeroplane flies, was an immensely strong point, and the defences in its neighbourhood—the “Wunderwerk” and the Schwaben Redoubt—successfully resisted our advance for nearly three months. For two years the Germans had concentrated all the skill of their engineers on the very elaborate stronghold called the “Wunderwerk.” This strong point was what one might call the key of an intricate maze of trenches, and commanded, to a considerable extent, the surrounding country, situated as it was on the high ground in front of Thiepval and behind Hohenzollern Trench.

It was not until September 14 that men of the New Army stormed and took this famous fort, in addition to many prisoners, and with comparatively few casualties. Very little has been said of this operation, but it really ought to rank as one of the best organised and best carried out attacks in the history of the Somme battle. Possibly it is owing to the fact that our troops were going ahead so rapidly at the time; still, I think the “Wunderwerk” was the key position, and its capture decided the fate of the fighting which came later.

Taking a cross-country short cut almost due east of the “Wunderwerk” we strike Mouquet Farm, and

continuing south-east, Pozières—on the Albert road. This road is in a very good condition, and on both sides of it could be seen, until a short time ago, one or two derelict tanks of the earliest type—relics of the original tank attack in front of Courcelette and Martinpuich. On the opposite side of the road to Pozières station there is a cemetery which contains the graves of Australian and British troops; many of the Mouquet Farm casualties rest here, if they have not yet been removed to the big memorial cemetery which has been constructed farther along the road.

It is going to be a very difficult matter for the tourist—unless he has already soldiered in the war area—to get a real idea of the actual strength of the German defences in the Somme area. By this time, I suppose, much of the wire has been cleared, a large proportion of the trenches and dug-outs filled in, and what used to be “No-Man’s Land” well under cultivation and everything generally made nice and tidy. Many of the alleged roads and tracks which, in the wet season—and that was every time we made a “push”—were up to the knees in mud, will now be in a much better condition, and, as a matter of fact, parts of the front will look quite as if a really comfortable sort of a war could be carried on with a minimum amount of trouble and inconvenience. If any of you get this idea in your heads when you are in these places just take a visit to the nearest big cemetery and see the names of the men who belonged to some of the finest fighting stock in the world. They found it difficult enough to advance,

# THE SOMME AND CAMBRAI.

Main Roads



Secondary " "



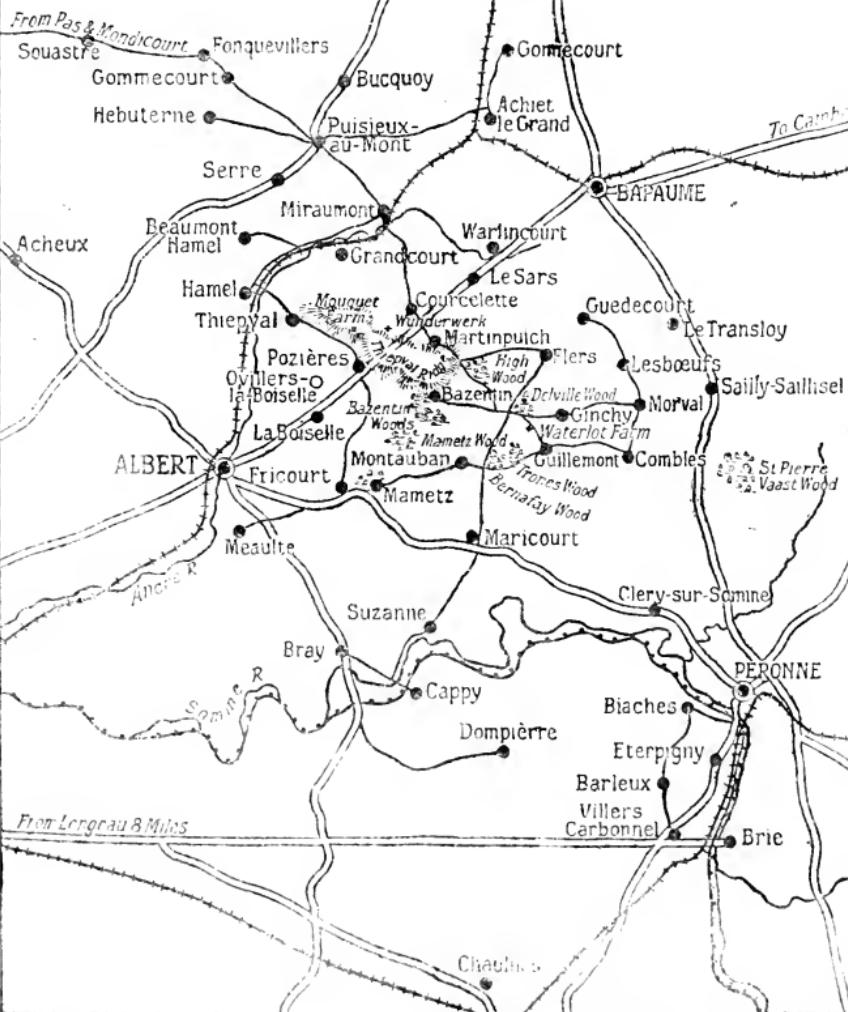
Railways



Canals



Scale 0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles



and if they could not advance no other men on earth could. They could not go forward, so they died. My own brother was one of them. He lies near Pozières.

A little south of Martinpuich will be found Mametz Wood and the two Bazentin Woods, while about a mile south-east will be found High Wood, of evil fame, then Delville Wood and Trones Wood, with Waterlot Farm between—all well-known names to those who eagerly looked for their daily paper when the Battle of the Somme was piling up the casualties. High Wood was a tough nut to crack, with its fortified craters and machine-gun nests, and we took it, and were forced out of it more than once, until it finally fell before the onslaught of the London Territorials. Flers—to the north-east—fell to Colonial and British troops, led by a tank, which lumbered lazily and complacently through the main street with the enemy bullets rattling like hail on its tough hide, much to the amusement of our infantry, who cheered it to the echo.

Another particularly tough obstacle was found in the “Quadrilateral,” a strongly defended position some half a mile east of Ginchy, on the Morval—Ginchy road. Here our Guards suffered badly, owing to the troops on their left flank being held up in front of this strong point. Although we lost very heavily, there is every reason to believe that the enemy did likewise, for it is known definitely that three of his best divisions were hopelessly put out of action.

The work performed by the tanks in this area

was invaluable; this dread new engine of warfare fairly "put the wind up" the Boche, following as they did our very thorough artillery preparation. The incident of the comic tank in Flers did more for the infantry than a double ration of rum would have done. It was during the attack on Ginchy that Lieut. Raymond Asquith, of the Grenadier Guards, the eldest son of the then Prime Minister, was killed at the head of his men.

The neighbourhoods of Courcelette and Flers were the scenes of very heavy counter-attacks by the Germans on or about September 16, the Canadians in the Courcelette positions having a particularly rough time for some days and nights. After the fall of the "Quadrilateral," Morval, Guedecourt, and Lesbœufs succumbed, and Combles was seriously threatened from the north as well as by the French troops operating to the south of the town, which was, before the war, a comparatively unimportant place of some 1,000 inhabitants. It was on the night of September 25 and 26 that the French and British troops joined hands in Combles, and, although the total of prisoners was not high, very large quantities of stores were taken. The line then ran from the eastern edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood through Sailly-Saillisel, behind Lesbœufs, touched Guedecourt, and then eastwards over the Bapaume—Albert road, north-west of Le Sars.

The month of October, 1916, just when our hopes were at their highest, owing to the successful operations of the previous weeks, just when another two

or three weeks' fine weather would have made all the difference in the world, was about the wettest and worst month for that time of the year that I can remember. Roads vanished under a sea of mud, guns got bogged when they were moved up into position, ammunition lorries got stuck and ammunition—heavy stuff, 8-inch and 9.2—had to be man-handled in order to keep the howitzers supplied.

October was one long nightmare to anybody unfortunate enough to be in the Somme area. Many and many a time did we pray that our particular lot would be sent up to the comparative comfort of the "Salient" at Ypres. I wonder if any of my readers remember the road to Hebuterne? That road broke the heart of more than one man on the ammunition supply. How the batteries ever got ammunition at all beats me hollow. And yet there are people who still think that the A.S.C. (M.T.) had a soft job! Some of them had, no doubt, at the bases, but what about the poor devils who—many times—worked forty-eight hours on end, at least half of the time under shell-fire, plunging and wallowing in and out of shell-holes, lorries heavily laden with shells and cartridges, well over the axles in mud, no lights, and very often no food, and not the slightest protection in the way of trench or dug-out when the road was under fire? And yet, in spite of it all, the guns were fed and the shells arrived at the batteries somehow or other! When looking at these roads and tracks in the Somme area—roads up to the battery positions—try to imagine what it must have been like to work

without lights at night—battery positions cannot be reached in the daytime except on certain occasions—and when the least error of judgment or sleepiness on the part of the drivers might precipitate both lorry and contents into some huge shell-hole or mine crater. The job of driver on a heavy battery ammunition lorry was no sinecure, and the gunners themselves—to do them justice—are the first to admit it.

A very good view over the battlefield can be obtained from High Wood, which can be reached by walking across country either from Flers or Martinpuich, if the visitor is energetic enough. High Wood, as its name implies, is on an elevation, though very little of the actual wood is left; the site is marked by shell-torn and bullet-pierced stumps of trees, remnants of trenches and matted undergrowth, strands of rusty barbed wire, and all the usual battlefield flotsam and jetsam, if one may be allowed to use the term. Still, if the day be fine and clear, a very good view may be obtained. Facing east one can trace the Bapaume—Péronne road, with its double line of shell-torn trees, quite plainly to be seen down into Sailly and Sailly-Saillisel and in front of St. Pierre Vaast Wood. To the north-east lies Le Transloy, and in the distance, to the west, rises Thiepval Ridge. The Butte de Warlincourt is also to be seen—made famous, and well remembered, by the French infantry.

A very interesting alternative route, which runs through and past many famous points in the Somme battlefield, is as follows: Start, say, from Doullens,

and take the main Arras road, turning off to the right at the Mondicourt railway crossing; go down through Mondicourt village—once famed for its billets—and then on to Pas, Souastre, and Fonquevillers—known with very good reason to Tommy as “Funkvillers”—from there to Gommecourt, Puisieux-au-Mont, Miraumont, Courcelette, and Martinpuich; then, passing the eastern side of High Wood, or stopping to view the surrounding country, as already recommended, take the Guillemont road, and so straight into Combles. The return run can be made viâ Arrow Head Copse and the southern ends of Trones Wood and Bernafay Wood to Montauban, Mametz, and Fricourt, and then direct to Albert.

To-day Albert is a scene of utter devastation, and most of the damage was done during the last stages of the war. For many months a huge figure of the Virgin, which surmounted the Church of Our Lady of Brebières, hung at a perilous angle, in a seemingly impossible position, apparently surveying the desolation spread out below. The pious French people looked upon this as a miracle and prophesied that the day on which the statue fell into the street would mark the end of the war. The statue did fall, some considerable time afterwards, dislodged by a shell, and although the war did not actually end the same day, yet it only lasted a few months longer, and so everybody was satisfied.

From Albert to Meaulte is but a short distance, and I recommend the motorist to miss this place, which is not very interesting, and take the direct

road to Bray-sur-Somme, which crosses the Meaulte—Fricourt road about a quarter of a mile north-west of Meaulte. On the run from Bray to Péronne many places of interest are to be seen, and the route recommended is the one from Bray to Cappy, or, better still, do not cross the Somme to Cappy, but turn sharp north and follow the eastern bank of the river up into Suzanne, from the heights of which place a magnificent view can be obtained. From Suzanne up north to Maricourt, and then easterly to Clery-sur-Somme, on the direct road to Péronne, which was captured by the British in March, 1917. Péronne has been through a rough time and has been very badly knocked about. It has changed hands three times, once in 1914, when the enemy were driven out by the French after doing the usual amount of looting; it then fell into their hands once more, and was retaken by our troops, as stated above. Once again during the great offensive in 1918 this ill-fated town changed hands, only to be evacuated when Foch's great drive carried us forward again.

In 1914 the enemy made a headquarters at Péronne Castle, and while their officers held a drunken orgy there, the men systematically searched the town for what they could find, even going to the extent of turning the contents of a toyshop in the Grande Place out on to the pavement, where they, apparently, got quite a lot of innocent amusement by pulling the tails off the wooden horses, blowing the tin trumpets, and reducing anything they did not like to powder by the simple process of jumping on it. One or two

particularly choice spirits conveyed "props" in the shape of toy swords, drums, etc., to the local photographer's shop, and insisted on being photographed in all their drunken glory, the place of honour on a pedestal in the centre of one group being given to a looted bottle of champagne. The heroes portrayed in this group were of the Unteroffizier class. What could one expect from the men if their N.C.O.'s behaved in this manner?

One of the things which will first strike the observer when visiting the battlefields of the Somme is the wanton destruction by the Germans of the fine trees which almost invariably lined the roads. No doubt in many cases such destruction was necessary from a strategical point of view. The Arras—Bapaume road is a case in point; but no amount of argument can explain away the fact that fruit trees in orchards, and such-like small trees, were cut down close to the ground for absolutely no reason at all save that of savage spite. Many instances of this kind can be seen in the Somme villages, or what is left of them. One particular case I remember well was in Bucquoy. Part of a garden wall remained standing, and against this wall grew two standard peach trees fastened up with the usual bits of cloth and nails; both these trees had been slashed with a hatchet or some similar implement about six inches above the ground; one had been severed clean through and was dead, the other, fortunately, was cut only half-way through, and was alive; not only alive but bearing some very excellent peaches. This, however, was an exception to

the rule, as most of the work had been so thoroughly done that it was obvious to anyone that systematic destruction had been ordered by the All Highest, or his immediate understrappers. War is war, we all understand, and such being the case, there is no place for sentiment, and everything is fair—as in love, so I am told—but when all is said and done, it is possible that the marvellous German war machine which we have all heard so much about might have been more successful if the principal object for which it was designed had not been lost sight of in a maze of complications and small details, of which the tree-cutting episode is a typical example.

Bucquoy has not suffered quite so badly as some other villages—by which I mean that several of the houses have at least one wall left standing. There used to be an estaminet near the cross-roads that went by the name of the “Red Lion”; a small board suspended from a bracket swung in the breeze, and bore the legend painted thereon (on the board, not the breeze) “Lion Rouge.” It was quite a comfortable, well-run little place, and did a good business—this was in 1914. Then the Boche came, and the next time I saw it was in 1916, just after the Arras stunt. The people were gone, and the estaminet was somewhat chipped—door gone, no glass in the windows, and a big hole in the roof, but the board still swung gaily in the same old breeze. Then the Boche came again, and the next time I saw the place was in 1918, just before we took Cambrai—the beginning of the end. This time what was left of the estaminet wasn’t

worth talking about; but the particular bit of wall which supported that board in 1914 was still functioning, and the board looked as fresh as ever. I passed it several times in as many weeks and it was still there, but one day, coming back from Cambrai, I looked up and it was not. Somebody "sooveneered" it, I suppose, for the bracket was bent downwards as if someone—standing possibly on the top of a lorry cab—had given it a good hard wrench. At any rate, it was gone, and I felt as if I'd lost an old friend. If this should meet the eye of the souvenir merchant I should very much like to have that board, as I should have taken it myself had he not forestalled me.

Farther along the road, in the same village, there was a Hun "Kantine," the interior of which had been decorated by various Hun artists, and very well decorated too, if somewhat in the heavy and gloomy mailed-fist kind of style. Part of the "Kantine" was reserved for N.C.O.'s, and the remainder was open to the common or garden "cannon fodder." Liquid refreshment had apparently been plentiful, judging by the great heap of lager beer bottles outside the men's reservation, whilst the N.C.O.'s evidently emptied many a bottle of "Bols" gin and hock. Looted champagne and French wines having all been consumed long before, the Hun had to come down to the level once more and pay for his drink, which must have gone very much against the grain.

In the very few villages which still retain some semblance of their original shape you can nearly

always find one of these Boche canteens, and in some cases the interior walls have been really well decorated, and some quite good drawings in black chalk and colour may still be found, many of them quite ambitious efforts, taking up the whole wall on one side of the room. I don't think Fritz expected to be pushed out, or perhaps he wouldn't have gone to so much trouble.

Péronne marks the limit of our Somme pilgrimage, and to those who are motoring, and have a fast car, I can thoroughly recommend the long straight road which reaches from Longeau, just outside Amiens, to Brie. This latter place is of interest from the fact that our Royal Engineers did some splendid bridging work there on the same day that we captured Péronne. In less than twelve hours a fast-running stream was bridged and our infantry were enabled to cross the Somme—a really smart bit of work. This road is almost as straight as a line drawn with a ruler across the map, and, with the exception of one or two stretches, had an almost perfect surface, even during the war, in spite of the fact that the French used it as their main supply artery for a large section of the front. Convoys of supply lorries, miles in length, could be seen careering along the road in the early morning, at an average speed of well over eighteen miles per hour; the dust was simply terrific, and the distance between each lorry was so small that one marvelled that bad smashes were not of more frequent occurrence.

The best way to get to Brie is through Villers-

Carbonnel, which may be reached by following the river bank south as far as the main road, and then turning due east; or what might be a more interesting route would be to go to Biaches—a place which proved a stumbling-block to the French infantry for a long time—and then, through Barleux, down on to the main road at Villers-Carbonnel, then dead straight for Amiens.

During the fighting for Péronne some fine work was done by the French monitors on the Somme Canal. They used to creep along at night and take up positions in some secluded corner, and then blaze away with their heavy stuff at the Boche line in and around the town, much to the annoyance of the said Boche, who tried very hard to spot them, but failed. I met the skipper of one of these monitors one day; I was introduced to him by a certain Captain Rogers, of the Royal Engineers, who lived a very lonely life in a dug-out near Frise, then in the French Army area. Tough as they make 'em, Rogers had been a master mariner until war broke out—a big hefty Scotsman with a marvellous fund of dry humour. A born story-teller, he soon made himself known to the French troops in his vicinity, and rapidly became quite a character in the district. He spoke French with a good old Scots accent and, when presenting me to the French naval man, gravely informed me that he—the Frenchman—was a "bloke de la flotte." He also conceived the gorgeous idea of calling his shrapnel helmet a "battle bowler," and the way in which he could always produce a sample of the

national beverage, even in the middle of a bad "strafe," was no less than miraculous.

## THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI

November, 1917

One of the most dramatic episodes of the whole war was, undoubtedly, the British attack on the town of Cambrai in November, 1917, and the resultant enemy counter attack, which deprived us of a very great deal of the ground we had gained by the first real surprise attack on a large scale which had been attempted and carried any distance forward. Cambrai was then, and had been ever since the opposing forces settled down to trench warfare proper, the main supply depot for the enemy forces on a very large part of the Western Front. A glance at the map will show the huge importance of the place from the supply centre point of view; excellent roads radiate from it in every direction, and the Arras—Cambrai road, a dead-straight run of 35 kilometres, used to be, before the war, one of the fastest stretches in France. This road then carries on through to Le Cateau and Landrecies, of Mons Retreat fame.

All the country round here is sacred to the memory of the "Old Contemptibles."

The British line in front of Cambrai, after the first battle of the Somme, is shown roughly on a German map—which I have in front of me as I write—as running through Fontaine-les-Croisilles, Bullecourt, across the Lagincourt—Quéant road, then on over the

main Bapaume—Cambrai road to La Vacquerie. After General Byng's magnificent attack with tanks on November 20, by which he successfully broke the Hindenburg Line, it ran approximately from Bourlon Wood—a bitterly fought-for and extremely dangerous salient—through Masnières, and then sank to Vendhuille. On November 30 the enemy made their powerful counter attack, for which they had obviously been massing troops and guns for some days, and the full torrent of their advance broke through between the 12th and 55th Divisions on the left and right respectively of Ravin Vingt Deux. The unfortunate 166th Brigade "fair got it in the neck," as one of the survivors of the 5th South Lancs. tersely put it. This battalion was, as a matter of fact, nearly wiped out, and all that remains to testify to the heroic resistance it put up is the number of wooden crosses scattered over the country-side. Although greatly reduced in strength, badly cut up and greatly outnumbered by the enemy, the gallant 55th Division re-formed their line and hung on like grim death to the new defence positions. The enemy here surrounded and captured Villers-Guislan, but was held up there definitely so long as the line of resistance of the 55th Division could be maintained. In this attack the 10th Liverpool Scottish and the 5th Royal Lancasters distinguished themselves by making the enemy pay a heavy toll for each yard he advanced, and worthily upheld the reputation of the 166th Brigade.

While the 55th Division, on the right of Ravine 22, was engaged in trying to stem the flow of the tide,

its neighbour, the 12th Division, composed of the 35th and 37th Brigades, was having an Homeric struggle with the enemy for the possession of the high ground and the Cambrai road, a part of the latter being stoutly held by some units of the 35th and 36th Brigades. It was during this part of the battle that Colonel Elliott Cooper attempted to rescue a party of the 8th Royal Fusiliers, which was all but surrounded. It was a magnificent attempt, and gained him the V.C.; but, unfortunately, in winning it, he got his death blow. Another V.C. hero was Lieut. Wallace, of the 36th Battery, who, with a devoted band of three or four men, rained shells on to the advancing enemy to the very last moment.

The rapid advance of the Germans was not stemmed at Villers-Guislan, however, and they entered Gonnelieu and even Gouzeaucourt, in the vicinity of which was the H.Q. of the 29th Division, under General De Lisle, whose splendid handling of this Division during the critical period of the battle was the subject of a special Order of the day by Sir Douglas Haig.

An exceedingly interesting section of the Cambrai battlefield—I am now referring to a later phase of the war, just previous to the fall of this town on October 9, 1918—is the line Noyelles-sur-l'Escaut—Marcoing—Masnières, and possibly extending to Crèvecœur. The road runs alongside the canal practically all the way, and there are bridges at all the places named, which I sincerely hope will be in better condition by the time this book appears than they

were when I had to cross them last. An examination of this part of the line will satisfactorily convince the visitor that the town of Cambrai had sufficient defence in the way of natural fortifications even if the Hindenburg and Drocourt—Quéant lines had been non-existent. Its vulnerable side was to the north-west, which was thoroughly realised by the enemy, and hence the Quéant system.

An extensive examination of any of the more important of the enemy defence systems will not be possible unless the visitor is blessed with unlimited time. The best way to gather some idea of the strength of these lines is to tap them at various points, preferably in such districts as Bullecourt and Fontaine-les-Croisilles. It would also not be a bad idea to carry on from Combles after having inspected the northern part of the Somme battlefields. The most instructive route would be through Rancourt and St. Pierre Vaast Wood on to Manancourt, Nurlu, Fens au Gouzeaucourt, and thus either down to Villers-Guislan and Epehy, or north from Gouzeaucourt to La Vacquerie, crossing the railway at Villers Pluich, and then up through Ribecourt, Flesquiére and Gramcourt-les-Havrincourt on to the sugar factory on the Romerstrasse, and so through Fontaine Notre Dame into Cambrai. A little to the north-east of the sugar factory lies Mœuvres—made famous by the little bunch of heroes of the Highland Light Infantry, whose exploits will go down to history. The story of how seven men stuck to their job is too well known to repeat here. I have no doubt that by the time this

book appears the enterprising inhabitants of Cambrai, at least those who have returned, will have got things somewhat shipshape, and it is just possible that accommodation and refreshment of a kind may be obtainable.

I have already mentioned that the Germans were great on internal house decorations by means of drawings and paintings, and one of them which I found on the wall of a house in Bus—a little village on the road from Sailly-Saillisel to Bertincourt—was an extremely good example of caricature. It occupied the whole of one wall, and depicted President Wilson as the Statue of Liberty brandishing an automatic pistol; it may still be in existence for all I know to the contrary—at any rate, it was there just before the Armistice.

## SECTION IV

### **St. Quentin—Roye—Noyon**

MONTDIDIER, which lies some little distance S.S.E. of Amiens, would have made an ideal centre from which to explore the towns of Roye, Nesle, St. Quentin, Chauny, and Noyon; but I fear that the German bombardment of the place in 1918, and our own answer after we evacuated it, will have caused too much damage to enable it to be made habitable after so short a period. Amiens, then, is the next best place, and when all is said and done there is but a difference of about ten kilometres between them, and Montdidier can be taken later when the visit to Compiègne and Soissons is tackled.

The best route from Amiens to St. Quentin is along the straight road through Brie, Estrées-en-Chausée, and Vermand, and then through the northern part of Holnon Wood into the town. Those who have already passed along the Amiens—Péronne road—as recommended in an earlier chapter describing the Péronne district—are advised to take the same road as far as Villers-Bretonneux—sacred to the Australians—and Abancourt. A short distance farther along will be seen a turning to the right, with a signpost pointing to Baynevillers, Harbonnières, Lihons, and Chaulnes. The last-mentioned place was taken by the British in the “Hindenburg Re-

treat" in March, 1917, on the same day that Bapaume was captured. During the Somme battle in September, 1916, whilst the British troops were busy moving on Combles the French were very heavily engaged on a front about fourteen miles from Barleux, just north of Villers-Carbonnel, to Chilly, south of Chaulnes and Lihons. A general engagement was fought, which resulted in our Allies capturing a large number of prisoners, material and guns.

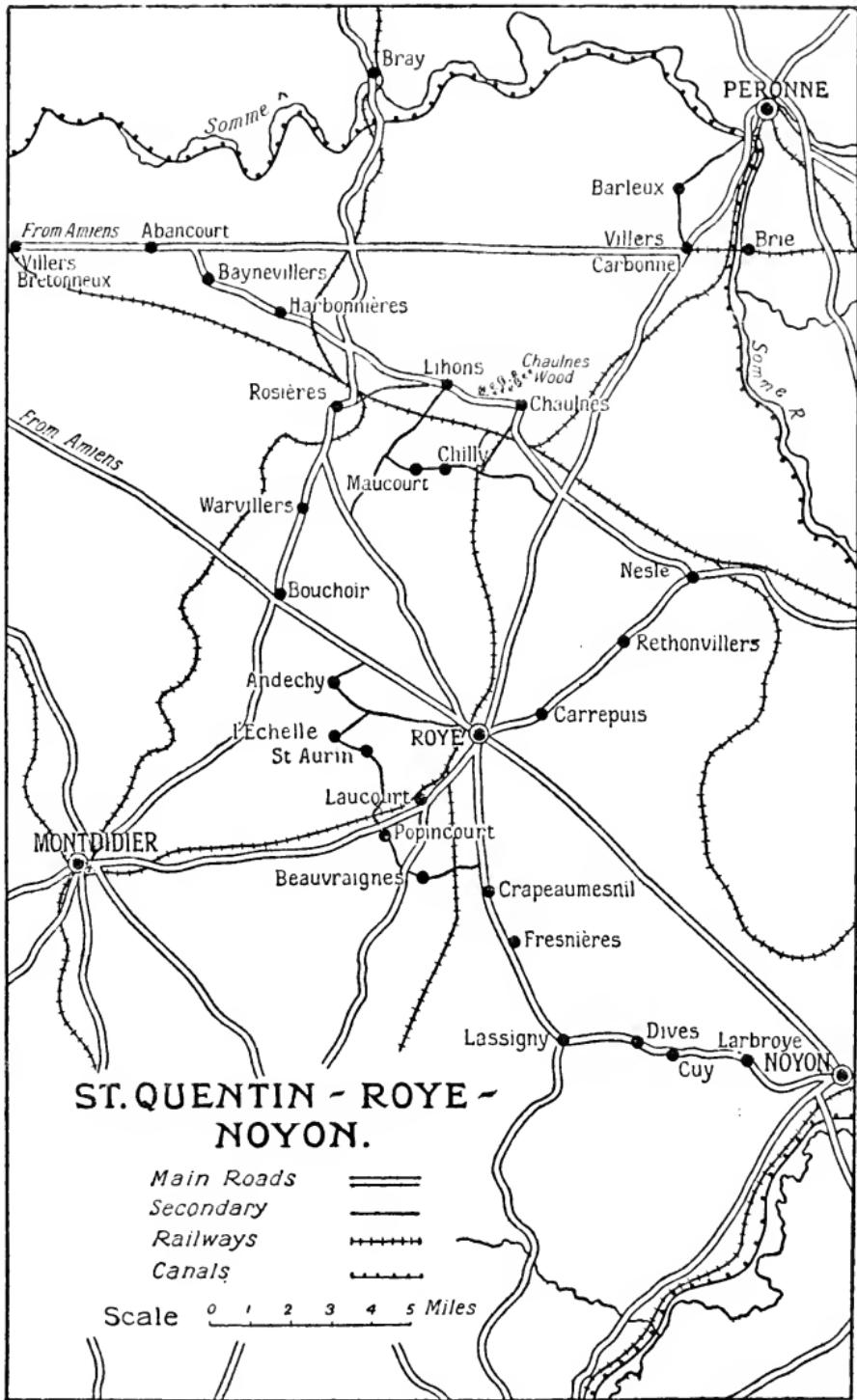
Instead of going straight from Chaulnes to Royé, I should advise a detour through Lihons, Rosières, Vrèly, Warvillers to Bouchoir, where the road joins up with the main Amiens—Royé road. Bouchoir, I remember well in 1914; it had been badly knocked about even in those early days of the war. One solitary inhabitant remained in the village—an old man, apparently about seventy years of age. He was absolutely dazed, sitting amidst the ruins of his farmhouse, and all that he could say in answer to questions was, that there had been a "big battle at the cross-roads, and that everybody had been killed." At the same cross-roads, two days before, a large farmhouse had been razed to the ground by shell-fire, and two of the unfortunate inhabitants were killed in one of the front rooms of the house; their feet could be seen sticking out from under the debris.

Just in front of this farm I saw a most extraordinary thing happen—a French Dragoon officer cantering across the road was hit by a shell (a direct hit), and both he and his horse simply vanished from my gaze with a loud bang and a cloud of grey-green

smoke, and all that could be found afterwards was a piece of saddle blanket and part of the horse's head with the bit still in its mouth. It was a most convincing demonstration of the power of modern high explosives.

From Bouchoir the road leads straight into Roye, and, if I remember rightly, is pretty bumpy, the pavé being bad and narrow, and the soft mud at the side almost like a bog in bad weather.

Roye is another town which got badly knocked about in 1914, and then became a comparatively unimportant place until the German offensive of 1918. It was quite a pretty little town, and when, in company with two other correspondents, I passed through in the very early days of the war—about twenty-four hours after the Huns had evacuated the place—we all three got a tremendous reception from some people in a café when we pulled up to try and “scrounge” an omelette, a bottle of wine, and a few apples. These good people loaded up the car with provisions for a month—almost. Strangely enough I passed through the place during the 1918 retreat, and repeated the performance; the same people were there. I hope that café is still standing; the name has slipped my memory, but it is in a street just off the square and not very far away from what is left of the church. It was near Roye, in September, 1914, that the enemy lost a lot of brand-new motor transport lorries; one of them was left stranded in the middle of the green in the town, and was a great source of delight to the French kiddies, who clambered all over



## ST. QUENTIN - ROYE - NOYON.

Main Roads        
Secondary Roads        
Railways        
Canals     

Scale      0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles

it, tooted the horn, and generally had the time of their lives.

Leaving Roye by the Nesle road and passing through Carrepuis and Rethonvillers, a short distance farther on takes us into the town of Nesle, uninteresting except for the fact that it once was a British Army Headquarters at the time of the big enemy offensive in 1918. Passing from Nesle through Eppeville on to the main Ham—Noyon road and turning sharp north at Eppeville we get into Ham. This town was one of the principal Boche objectives during the initial stage of the March 21 break-through. Its importance during the war lay in the fact that it was a large railhead, both for rations and ammunition, and had served this purpose for the enemy when previously in their possession. So far as Tommy Atkins is concerned, Ham was chiefly noted for the fact that, provided a lorry could be requisitioned, quite good beer—in barrels—could be obtained from the local brewery; an inestimable blessing to men down the line for a rest. There was also, if I remember rightly, a branch of the E.F.C. in operation.

The town of Ham was entered by the German cavalry on or about the evening of March 23. Very little has been heard of the splendid work of General Seely's Canadian Cavalry, the officers and men of which fought so gallantly in their endeavour to save the town. They charged the enemy so viciously that they drove them out of the place time after time—to fall back again and again with grievously thinned ranks, owing to lack of support. These gallant

Canadian troopers did great execution with the sword, and when the enemy infantry tried to hide in dug-outs and places into which a man on horseback could not enter, the Canadians dismounted and followed them on foot, sword in hand.

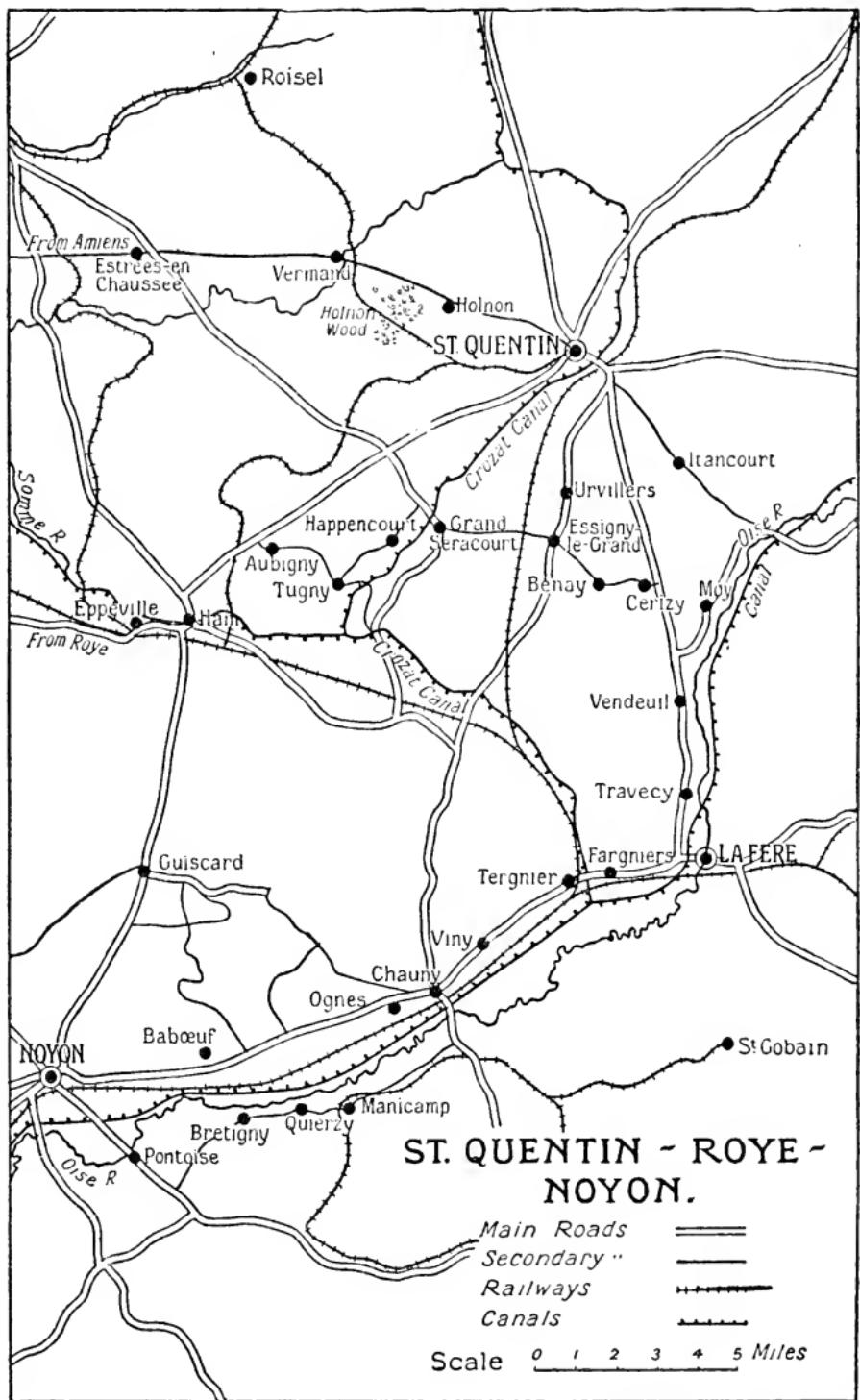
There is a good road to St. Quentin from Ham, which passes to the left of the village of Aubigny, and it would be worth while to go through this place to Tugny, and have a look at the bridgehead which was so gallantly defended by a brigade of the 20th Division during the rearguard action on March 22, 1918. From Tugny to Happencourt is but a short distance, and a little farther brings us to the bridge across the Crozat Canal and into Grand Seracourt. Thence going due east we get to Essigny-le-Grand and then north-east to Urvillers. From captured enemy orders and from the statements of prisoners it is known that the enemy plan for the first day's advance in the 1918 offensive was to occupy the line of the Crozat Canal, and, having by that time badly broken the British line, to make a rapid westward advance day by day. During this particular period of the offensive fog was very prevalent, and although this undoubtedly hampered the defence, owing to the fact that masses of enemy infantry would appear out of the mist at about twenty or thirty yards' range, yet there is also ample reason to believe that great confusion reigned in the Hun lines, many fairly large parties getting lost and cut off, as well as severely cut up, by our troops.

The line in the St. Quentin sector on the opening

day of the March 21 attack ran from in front of St. Quentin, south-east midway between Urvillers and Itancourt—this latter place being in the enemy's hands and Urvillers in ours—down to Moy, which was occupied by the British.

The full force of the attack south of St. Quentin developed on that particular part of the line of which Urvillers was the centre, and was directed on this place and on to Essigny-le-Grand. From this latter place a road runs to Benay, and then east to Cerizy, where it joins the St. Quentin—La Fère main road through Vendeuil, passing Travecy and following the line of the Crozat Canal and the twisty Oise into La Fère. It was on this sector that our London men put up such a good fight—Surreys and Kents, Rifle Brigade and London Regiment. Men of the good old 58th Division, in company with men of the 18th Division, fought desperately to stem the huge wave of Boche "cannon fodder." If it had only been a matter of two to one, the enemy would never have passed, but the odds were very much heavier than that, and their reserves, apparently, inexhaustible. Wave after wave of storm troops poured over our positions, and the inevitable happened; we had to fall back, but not without inflicting a much heavier loss and a much more serious check than was anticipated by the Imperial Staff.

From La Fère we go on to Fargniers and Tergnier and then to Chauny through Viny, hugging the railway line and the west bank of the canal. Chauny, when I saw it in February, 1918, was then very badly



smashed up and was absolutely lifeless and desolate. An odd French soldier or two of the *genie*, or engineers—the equivalent of our own Royal Engineers—were the only signs of life in the place. One or two camouflaged motor-boats and barges on the canal showed that a certain amount of activity took place at night, but there was nothing doing in the daytime.

This town—which before the war had a population of some 10,000 inhabitants—must have been a very pretty place, and it was pitiful to view the destruction and desolation which war had effected. I should think a good 50 per cent. of the houses had been destroyed by mines. As in many other places, when the Germans evacuated Chauny, they took with them all the young girls and boys to work in their factories beyond the Rhine. Chauny is well worth seeing.

To Noyon—through Ognes and passing Babœuf off to the right of the road—the going is quite good, though the surroundings are somewhat uninteresting. It would be almost better to cross the canal and river just south of Chauny, and, following the south bank of the river through Manicamp, Quierzy and Brestigny, strike the Noyon road at a point just south-east of Pontoise. Thence, crossing the Oise river, the canal and the railway, it is a straight run into the quaint old town of Charlemagne, with its historic Hôtel de Ville. The beautiful cathedral and cloisters have been badly damaged by fire, whether irretrievably so or not I do not know, as I have not been able to get back there since the hurried evacuation of the place on the night of March 25, 1918.

During the advance on Noyon from the two directions of Guiscard and Chauny heavy fighting took place in the neighbourhood of Babœuf, which village, having been overrun by the enemy, was recaptured by a brilliant counter-attack, carried out by troops of the 18th Division, in which they took 150 prisoners. Marshal Haig's dispatch in connection with the withdrawal on this section of the front clearly emphasised the fact that we were very greatly handicapped by the shortage of men ; but I do not think that anybody who did not take part in the withdrawal from the Ham, Guiscard and Noyon region has any conception of the actual facts.

On the afternoon of March 23 I was located with part of my unit in the barracks at Noyon (incidentally this barracks had been burnt out by the Germans when they retreated a year previously, and there was nothing left but the bare walls). Headquarters had received orders to retire to Montdidier ; all sorts of rumours were afloat that Ham had been captured, Guiscard had fallen, and that the Hun was advancing rapidly on Noyon. This disquieting news was to a certain extent supported by the sight of several batteries of French 75's entering Noyon from the direction of Guiscard. As I had a considerable amount of material to move and things were, apparently, getting serious, I conferred with the only other officer present—an Australian named Finley—and we decided that, as it seemed quite impossible to obtain any reliable news from anybody, the only course open to us was to scout out the position for ourselves. We got hold

of an old closed car that would have made a good hearse but was little good for anything else, and was nicknamed “the hutch,” usually with the addition of an adjective, and proceeded shortly after midnight slowly and carefully up the Guiscard road. The night was beautifully clear with a bright moon; but there was a certain amount of ground fog and an extremely ominous silence. Not a gun could be heard, nor did we meet a soul until near the outskirts of Guiscard; then we saw a few—a very few—French infantry lying about at the side of the road. After a halt in Guiscard—which had been evacuated—and a good look round the now deserted site of a Heavy Artillery Siege Park, just to see if there was anything worth “scrounging” (there was, and Finley can tell you all about it), a move was made up the road in the direction of Ham. Still the dead silence, broken every now and then by the long-drawn-out and echoing boom of a very distant gun; still no signs of troops, until, some four or five miles out of Guiscard, the car was pulled up suddenly, and a tin-hatted infantry major shoved his head into the window and said :

“Where the —— do you think you’re going—eh ?”

Finley and I explained as concisely as possible that we were tracking some lost transport, this being the best excuse we could manufacture at short notice.

“Well—if you’ll just take my advice, boys, you’ll turn round and get back as fast as you can; this is the front line you’re just crossing !” said the major,

pointing first to one side of the road and then the other.

Getting down out of the car, we looked and saw a thin line of tired-out men stretching away in a sort of dark irregular curve at right angles to the road on both sides, with rifles resting on a natural parapet, where one field finished at a somewhat higher level than the other, and with machine-guns in position. A long line of dead-silent, dead-tired British infantry-men, dozing with their cheeks caressing their rifle-butts, prone on the ground, many of them actually sound asleep in the first rest they had had for many hours, yet ready on the instant to pour a withering hail of lead into the approaching enemy. In front the slightly undulating, fog-beshrouded, mysteriously silent No Man's Land; no wire, no trenches—just the thin khaki line of dead-tired men. I looked at Finley, and he put my thoughts into words :

"If this is all we've got to hold up a few million Boches, I think the sooner we get back to Noyon and pack up the better."

By this time a machine-gun officer had joined us, and I well remember the four of us standing there in the middle of the road talking about leave, of the rapidly deteriorating quality of E.F.C., whisky, and George Robey's latest gag at the Alhambra—anything but the war. Then suddenly realising that the position was one which might liven up at any moment our driver was instructed to turn the car round. This he did, going out into No Man's Land to do so, and, bidding our new friends good night and good luck,

we made our way back, thoroughly agreed that what we had seen was enough to show us that a retreat was inevitable ; and so it happened.

The following night, about midnight, in what was called the "officers' club" in Noyon, whom should I meet but our friend the machine-gun officer. He was very tired, had had a rough time, the major had been killed, the men had put up a splendid scrap, but . . . He went to sleep with his head on his hands on the table, and when we found him some food fell asleep again two or three times whilst eating it.

In the meantime, guns and howitzers, large and small—what was left of them—were blocking up the roads leading from Guiscard and Chauny into Noyon, and gunner officers were trying their utmost to evolve order out of the chaos ; collecting stray personnel and ordnance, making up one battery out of the remains of two or three, and getting ready for the stand which everybody wondered had not taken place before. One thing the Germans taught us which will not be forgotten in a hurry, and that is—heavy ordnance, anything bigger than a field gun, is utterly useless in a retreat, however useful it may be, and undoubtedly is, in an advance.

Historically, Noyon is a celebrated place ; for here Charlemagne was crowned, Calvin (the Protestant) first saw the light, and Hugh Capet was made king.

Almost due north leading out of the town is the road to Guiscard and Ham, and on the right-hand side of the road, opposite the wall which surrounds the cavalry barracks—already mentioned—will be found

a very substantially stone-built enclosure, a Hun graveyard, inside of which may be found some fine specimens of the stonemason's art. One thing the Germans never failed to do, and that was to pay due honour to the fallen. Massive and ornate monuments were numerous in all his cemeteries behind the line. No doubt it was part of a well-thought plan, calculated to make the soldier feel what a great man he was—even when dead. It was also the fact—at least so far as my own observation goes—that the enemy treated the dead of any nation with the same respect as his own. I have seen many of these cemeteries, and have been struck with this fact again and again.

Another cemetery—French this time—may be found on the left-hand side of the Rue de Lille; one corner of it is reserved for French coloured troops, as the queer inscriptions on the headstones will testify.

Leaving the town by the Compiègne road, we travel south for a very short distance, and then turn off to the right, where the signpost shows Lassigny to be a comparatively short run of some thirteen kilometres. The road runs through territory which has seen many stiff fights. Larbroye is the first village to be entered, then Suzoy, Cuy, and through Dives into the town.

It was in the region of Lassigny in September, 1914, that some very heavy fighting took place between the French and Germans, and after the place was captured—so runs an account in *Le Matin*—some officers made a thorough examination of a château which had for a long time been in the hands of a

member of the German Diplomatic Corps and which was noted for its numerous lawn-tennis courts. These courts were, as a matter of fact, covering very solidly-built concrete gun emplacements, ideally situated to command the surrounding country with heavy howitzer or gunfire; another example of German thoroughness which failed to mature.

The French, under General Castlenau, fought unceasingly in this district from September 25, 1914, until almost the end of the month, and were eventually driven back by very much heavier forces which the enemy, alarmed by the threat to their St. Quentin line of communication, had brought to bear in order to make a determined effort to stem the French advance. It was during the rearguard fighting after October 1 that the French, by a brilliantly executed strategical movement, ambushed a large enemy force, inflicting very heavy casualties and securing between 750 and 800 prisoners. I believe the German report classified this action as a "glorious victory"; if so, then the action which took place a few days later must have been even more so, for between Chaulnes and Roye the French added another 1,600 prisoners to their bag.

All the country round about this district is very interesting and well worthy of study, for Lassigny was in the front line for many moons. The track of the war can easily be followed up from Lassigny through Fresnières, Crapeaumesnil, Beauvraignes, Popincourt, Laucourt, l'Echelle-St.-Aurin, Andechy, and so on through Maucourt and Chilly to Lihons and

Chaulnes. During the Battle of the Somme in September, 1916, the French were held up south of the Brie—Amiens road by strong enemy positions in Chaulnes Wood. This place was only captured after very determined and bloodthirsty attacks and counter-attacks, the severity of which is obvious by the numerous graves in the vicinity, and the strength of the enemy strong points is easily to be seen if the visitor likes to do a little exploring on foot.

One little bit of advice to those who “foot-slog” amongst undergrowth in any of these woods or in any place over which heavy fighting has taken place and which is heavily overgrown by grass: Wear a good pair of heavy boots and leggings that will resist the possible scratches from hidden strands of rusty barbed wire. In these places it is a matter of “watch your step.” There are many thousands of old unexploded hand-grenades still lying about in the undergrowth, and some of them, owing to the fact that the pins are almost rusted through, may go off at a touch. I do not say they *all* will explode so easily; the later types are comparatively safe even when handled; but it is always better to be on the safe side, and anything of an explosive nature should not be touched. Do not poke suspicious-looking, or even unsuspicious-looking, objects with your stick or you might finish your tour sooner than you expect and cause the authorities quite a lot of trouble detaching your remains from the surrounding district for burial purposes. This may sound funny, but it’s good advice for all that.

Whilst on the subject of “duds,” I once saw in

Bucquoy two or three bright specimens of that incomparable creature, the "Chink" Labour Corps man, who had just finished building an oven in the side of the road out of such-like materials as fully-fused Boche 4.2 howitzer shells. The grating under which the fire was going to be started was composed of 77 mm. field-gun shells with cartridge-case complete. I caught them just as they were breaking up some of the basket shell-containers to use as kindling, and hurriedly sought out the British N.C.O in charge. He considered that the best remedy would be for him to withdraw all the other Chinks in the vicinity to a safe distance, take up some point of vantage from which the proceedings could be viewed, and await results. He told me quite candidly that he had found that example was much better than precept when dealing with Chinese labour.

## SECTION V

### **Montdidier—Compiègne—Soissons**

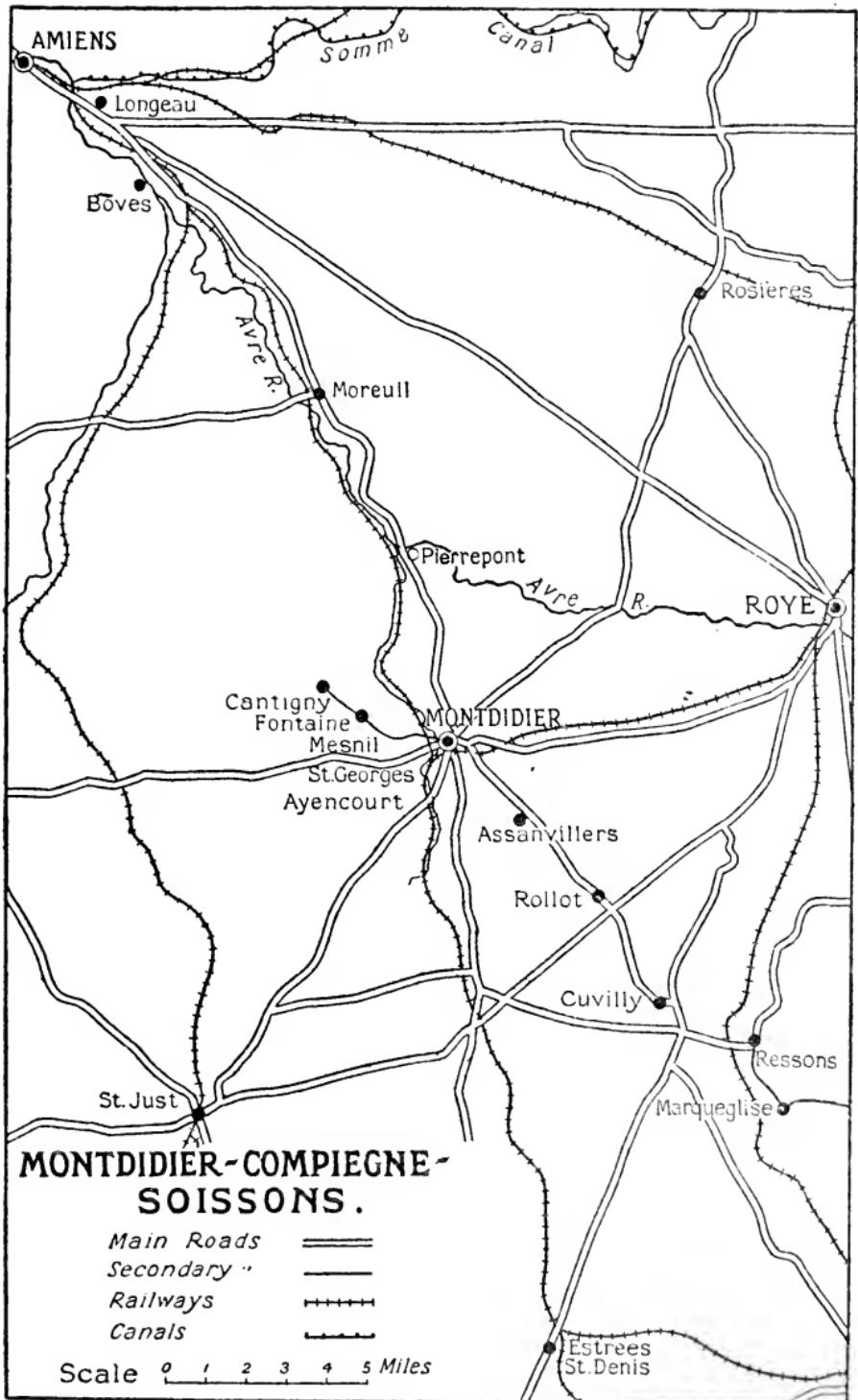
THE town of Montdidier, which marked the finish of the German advance after the Flanders offensive in 1918, is a little over 30 kilometres from Amiens, along a picturesque road which, after passing through Pierrepont—going north—follows the eastern bank of the Avre into Moreuil, and then up to Boves; a little farther on the road runs into the main Amiens—Roye highway, just short of Longeau, and then direct into Amiens. Montdidier could be taken in on the return journey to Amiens from Roye or Lassigny, if the traveller has time. There is nothing much to see in the place, and it has been badly knocked about—mostly, I believe, by the Allied artillery, just before the town was retaken when our 1918 advance started. My own recollections of the place are not particularly pleasant, possibly owing to the fact that I arrived—with the bits—after the hurried evacuation of Noyon, at the hour of three in the morning, very hungry, deadly tired, and somewhat dispirited at the constant retreating, to find that there was nothing to eat and drink, and not even a blanket to be obtained. I found my Headquarters billeted at the Château, and every bed bagged. Not that I had expected to find even a bed there; but when I peeped into one or two of the rooms and saw various members of the gilded Staff

snoring luxuriously under eiderdowns—well—it did make one feel rather envious. However, I slept quite soundly on the floor of the corridor, and was awakened a few hours later by someone falling over me and using language of a most ungentlemanly kind, to which I replied suitably.

The one hotel in the place which looked like an hotel was pretty rotten, for it was impossible to get anything to eat there unless one got it for oneself, and even then the proprietor was not as pleasant as he might have been. Montdidier was evacuated shortly after that, and then a few of us took the matter in hand and managed to get a respectable meal together out of the debris.

The extreme point west of Montdidier reached by the enemy on May 8, 1918, is given on a German map which I have before me, and shows their line, just east of the village of Cantigny, slightly west of Fontaine, and running through Mesnil-St. Georges. It then bends eastwards, cutting the railway midway between the town and Ayencourt village. Thus far did they come, but no farther, and they remained and dug themselves in until the beginning of the end. This line of defences can be followed down through Assanvillers to Rollat, where we leave it to cross the St. Just—Roye main road, and so on to Cuvilly and Ressons, and then through Marqueglise and across the Oise into the Forêt-de-Laigue to Choisu-au-Bac; from there along the north-west corner of the Forêt-de-Compiègne into the town itself.

The route I have mapped out is not the most direct,



by any means, but it is certainly the most interesting. Strong as the enemy were in 1918, their strength was not enough to enable them to reach Compiègne, the fall of which place would have been more or less of a disaster. In September, 1914, in the thickly wooded country to the south of Compiègne, the 1st Cavalry Brigade was overtaken by some German cavalry, and lost a battery of horse artillery, as well as several officers and men killed and wounded. Aided by some detachments of the 3rd Corps, which was operating on their left, they made a brilliant counter-attack, and not only recovered all their own guns, but succeeded in capturing twelve of the enemy's.

In connection with the fighting in the region of Compiègne, I cannot do better than quote an account given by a wounded soldier, which appeared in the London *Evening News*:

“We were in a field when the Germans dropped on us all of a sudden. The first hint we had of their presence was when a battery of guns on the right sang out, dropping shells into a mob of us who were waiting for our turns at the wash-tub—the river. There was no panic as far as I saw, only some of our fellows, who hadn’t had a wash for a long time, said strong things about the Germans for spoiling the best chance we’d had for four days. We all ran to our posts in response to bugles which rang out all along the line, and by the time we all stood to arms the German cavalry came into view in great strength all along the left front. As soon as they came within range we

poured a deadly volley into them, emptying saddles right and left, and they scattered in all directions. Meanwhile their artillery kept working up closer on the front and right, and a dark cloud of infantry showed out against the sky-line on our front, advancing in a formation rather loose for the Germans. We opened fire on them, and they made a fine target for our rifle fire, which was very well supported by our artillery. The fire from our guns was very effective, the range being found with ease, and we could see the shells dropping right into the enemy's ranks. Here and there their lines began to waver and give way, and finally they disappeared. Half an hour later more infantry appeared on our right front, but we could not say whether it was the same body or not. This time they were well supported by artillery, machine-guns, and strong forces of cavalry on both flanks. All came on at a smart pace, with the apparent plan of seizing a hill on their right. At the same moment our cavalry came into view, and then the whole Guards Brigade advanced. It was really a race between the two parties to reach the hill first, but the Germans won easily owing to their being nearer by half a mile.

“As soon as their guns and infantry had taken up position, the cavalry came along in a huge mass with the intention of riding down the Irish Guards, who were nearest to them. When the shock came it seemed terrific to us in the distance, for the Irishmen didn't recoil in the least, but flung themselves right across the path of the German horsemen. We could hear

the crack of the rifles and see the German horses impaled on the bayonets of the front ranks of the Guardsmen ; then the whole force of infantry and cavalry were mixed up in one confused heap, like so many pieces from a jig-saw puzzle. Shells from the British and German batteries kept dropping close to the tangled mass of fighting men, and then we saw the German horsemen get clear and take to flight as fast as their horses could carry them. Some had no horses ; they were bayoneted where they stood. While this was going on there was a confused movement among the German infantry, as though they were going to the assistance of the cavalry, but evidently they did not like the look of things, for they stayed where they were. After this little interruption the Guards continued to advance—the Coldstreamers leading this time, with the Scots in reserve, and the Irish in support. Taking advantage of the fight between the cavalry and the infantry, the German artillery had advanced to a new position, from which they kept up a deadly fire from twelve guns. Our infantry and cavalry advanced simultaneously against this new position, which they carried together in the face of a galling fire. In the excitement the enemy managed to get away two of their guns, but the remainder fell into our hands. The infantry and the cavalry supporting the guns didn't wait for the onslaught of our men, but bolted like mad, pursued by our cavalry, and galled by a heavy fire from our infantry and artillery, which quickly found the range. We heard later that the Germans were in very great

force, and had attacked in the hope of driving us back and so uncovering the French left, but they got more than they bargained for. Their losses were terrible in what little of the fighting we saw, and when our men captured the guns, there was hardly a German left alive or unwounded. Altogether the fight lasted seven hours, and when it was over our cavalry scouts reported that the enemy was in retreat."

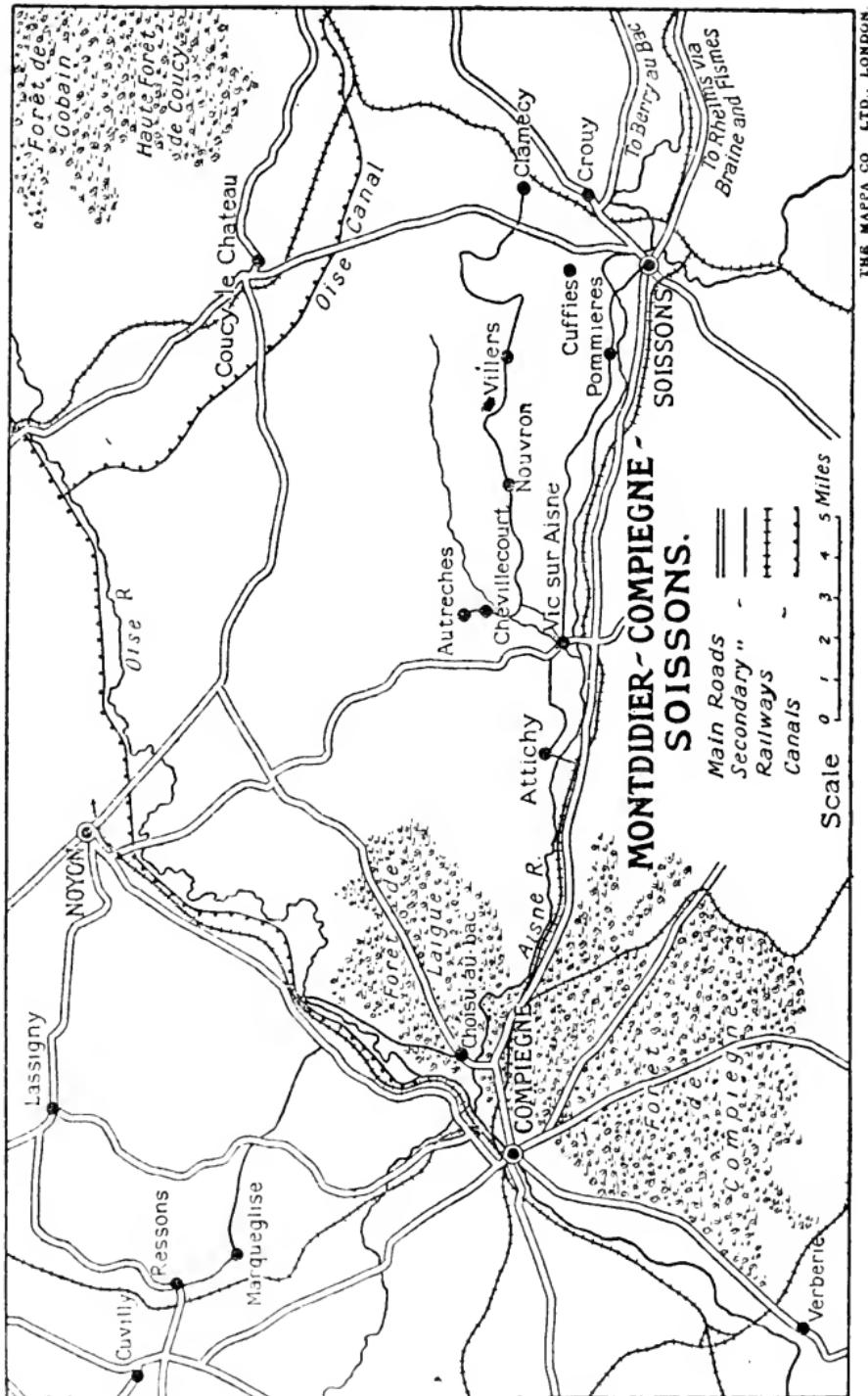
This very interesting letter apparently refers to the action of Sept. 1, which I have already mentioned, but the gallant guardsman who wrote it is two short in his account of the number of guns taken, for we must take Sir John French's dispatch of Sept. 17, 1914, as correct. In this he definitely states that twelve guns were captured.

The Forest of Compiègne is well worthy of a prolonged tour of inspection, but as this section of the book is dealing also with the battlefields more to the east, possibly we had better take the road out of the town which cuts through the neck of wooded country joining the Forest of Laigue to the Forest of Compiègne. The road runs south of the River Aisne, and the first place of any size we reach is Attichy—which is across the river. Here will be found some relics of the past in the shape of destroyed bridges and signs of the task the R.E.'s had when they bridged the river under heavy fire from the northern banks. From Attichy to Vic-sur-Aisne, another memory of 1914, is but a short distance. Here the river is crossed again, and we come on to the Compiègne—Soissons road at La Vache Noire. I re-

commend the detour through Attichy and Vic-sur-Aisne owing to the fact that the river crossings in both places were the scenes of some violent fighting, and a good idea will be gained of the great difficulties with which our troops were faced when these crossings were forced.

The road on to Soissons is a good one, and on both sides of it will be seen old French encampments, dumps, and visible evidence of the huge back-area organisation which is necessary in these days of modern warfare. Some little distance before getting into Soissons a signpost will be seen on the left-hand side of the road, which shows the way to Pommiers. About three hundred yards down this side road there used to be a huge dump of captured war material covering about thirty acres. Here could be seen guns, howitzers, tanks, enemy steel helmets by the thousands, and many hundred suits of the special toughened steel armour which was provided for the storm troops. Ammunition was here in huge quantities—anything from the largest-sized howitzer shell to small arms and automatic pistol cartridges.

A most charming artillery captain was in charge of the place, and he had arranged what he called his museum, in which, carefully numbered and labelled, could be found a specimen of every deadly weapon of warfare which the Boche had ever produced, with the exception of field-pieces, of course, which were parked outside; a most interesting exposition, and one which I hope is still there. It is certainly worth while to make a short detour to find out if the exhibits



are still on view. The entrance to the park was on the right-hand side of the Pommiers road, and it is too big to be missed if now in existence.

But a stone's-throw from the Pommiers turning is Soissons—another of the many monuments to *Kultur*. I first saw this town in September, 1914, and even then the splendid old cathedral had been very badly smashed, and very few of the streets had escaped the torrent of shells which the enemy rained into the town. Many houses were burnt in these early days, and the large chapel on the north side of the cathedral was absolutely destroyed, and although the east window remains—or remained when I saw the cathedral last—it has been very badly damaged. Needless to say all the fine stained glass has vanished long ago, shattered into dust. The Germans knew their Soissons well, and their gunfire was extraordinarily accurate, the barracks being completely wiped out early in the bombardment. It is said that several spies had been arrested, and this possibly accounts for the accuracy of the German gunfire.

In the Boulevard Jeanne d'Arc, in which might have been found most of the better-class residences, hardly a house remains standing. In 1914 some of these houses presented curious sights, one in particular had had the whole front destroyed and was standing open to the street from ground to attics, just like one of those big sectioned doll's houses which are to be seen in toyshop windows. All the furniture was in position, and bedrooms, drawing-room and dining-room were all apparently untouched as regards the

interior. The sight would have been comical if it had not been so pathetic.

Soissons has been an unfortunate town. It suffered greatly in 1870, when the old abbey church of St. Jean was damaged, though not so badly as it was in 1914, when a large shell partially demolished one of the graceful spires. Several bridges over the river were destroyed by the Germans when they evacuated the town, though one was left in an almost usable condition owing to the failure of certain charges to explode, which shows that the enemy made a rather hurried exit. In spite of the proximity of the town to the line, many of the shops still continued to trade, in which respect it was like Béthune. The inhabitants became accustomed to and were able to time the occasional "hates" to which the place was subject from time to time. Soissons invariably was shelled after a German reverse, and when the populace began to realise this fact the occasions on which shells landed in the town, though inconvenient and causing a general retirement to the cellars, more often than not provided cause for a certain amount of jubilation. The "Hotel of the Red Lion" provided a good meal and good wine during the greater part of the war; the prices charged were also quite moderate, extraordinarily so, indeed, when one considers the risks taken by those who stayed behind to serve, and the very real difficulty of obtaining supplies.

It was in Soissons in 1918 that I first saw our American Allies, steel-helmeted men on traffic control duty at the cross streets. Two or three of us halted

at "The Red Lion" for lunch; the party included a colonel, with a goodly selection of ribbons on his manly bosom. In the dining-room, thoughtfully wielding a toothpick and straddling a chair, arms rested on the back, was a large American officer, who stared at us all in turn with great persistence for full five minutes; then—suddenly making up his mind and pocketing his toothpick—he slouched over in a leisurely manner and gave us good day:

"Say now—I guess you'll be English officers—am I right?"

We pleaded guilty. He examined us all thoughtfully once more, and halted at the colonel: "Now jest what rank might you be, sir?"

"I'm a colonel." "Uh-hum," still thoughtfully—"and what might that coloured chart mean?" queried our still inquisitive acquaintance, pointing to the medal ribbons on the colonel's breast. The various ribbons were explained in detail—although the wearer was rather taken aback by the "coloured chart" designation—and our American gave us each another thoughtful inspection, remarked that it was a "peaceful sort of war at present," and finished up with, "I thank you vurry much gentlemen—good day," before he went off.

An examination of the German defence systems north of Soissons and the Aisne is well worth while, and one of the best routes is the Coucy-le-Château road, which crosses the old trench lines between Crouy and Cuffies, then east to Clamecy, Villers, Nouvron-Chevillecourt, and Autreches. These places

I have mentioned were right in the line, and possibly all that remains to identify any of these villages is a board with the name painted upon it. Desolation and devastation reigns supreme, and the French soldiers have fought and died in their thousands in this region. All the immediate front-line area in this district ought to be done on foot, as it will be found impossible to examine it thoroughly otherwise, and there is much to be seen—and missed—here. It should always be remembered that the most important defences, as well as the most interesting, are usually invisible until one gets close to them. On their invisibility to the enemy depended both their importance and efficiency.

Some wondrous underground caverns and dug-out systems will be found on this particular section of the front. One place I well remember was a huge underground quarry, which had been developed by the enemy until it was capable of housing a whole division complete with transport. Officers' quarters, N.C.O.'s and men's quarters, and officers' stables, kitchens, every imaginable kind of accommodation had been hewn out of the solid rock. Many thousands of beds, complete with mattresses, were still there, and were much appreciated by the Allied troops when the place was captured. Water was laid on, and there was a complete electric-power plant, which enabled every section of this enormous underground hostel to be illuminated by electric light. It must have cost the German taxpayer a great deal of money—and all for nothing !

Places like this are worth seeing, and I don't suppose for a moment that the tourist will be allowed to miss them if he—or she—is in the district, for by now the thrifty French peasantry will be back again on their land, and well aware of the value of these relics of the war as show-places. Nor would I grudge them a franc or two; they have five very lean years to make up for, even after their houses are rebuilt and their farms once more are bearing crops.

As in the majority of districts adjacent to the battle areas, main roads in France and Flanders will be found in comparatively good condition; many secondary roads also are not too bad. Care should be taken, however, with secondary or tertiary roads which cross the old trench lines, as some of them are still almost impassable, and motorists should bear this in mind when darkness comes on, or it is likely there may be a few broken springs, cracked frames, and ruined tyres. It is always advisable to carry enough petrol and oil to last for a considerable time—by that I mean plenty and to spare for the journey there and back, whatever the day's plan may be, as it will be difficult to obtain supplies in any of the devastated districts. The same, naturally, applies to photographic plates and films, for I suppose the majority of tourists will want a photographic record of the trip. It is, indeed, a great pity that the British troops were not allowed to use cameras during the war, as no amount of imagination can picture some of the places or the conditions under which our troops worked and fought.

By the time this book appears it is quite possible that the enterprising proprietor of the "Lion Rouge" at Soissons may have so reorganised and repaired his hotel that one may be able to put up there; if so, then stay there by all means; it will make a splendid centre from which to conduct investigations. Otherwise the nearest place of any importance and habitable is Compiègne, where there is a large and excellent hotel. Compiègne, however, is a long way to go back should the reader wish to go over the Chemin-des-Dames country as far as Berry-au-Bac. I expect, also, that any person who gets as far east as this will not rest satisfied without seeing Rheims, which is only about eighteen kilometres south-east and under sixty from Soissons, through Fismes and Braisne—or Braine as it is sometimes spelt.

## SECTION VI

### **The Retreat from Mons**

#### MONS—LE CATEAU—VILLERS-COTTERETS— THE MARNE

THE retreat from Mons was one of those episodes—one can hardly call it more than an episode in a war of the dimensions of the one just concluded—which will go down in history to our children and grandchildren in much the same way as the Charge of the Light Brigade, the Indian Mutiny, or the Battle of Waterloo or Trafalgar have left their imprint on our own minds. It proved again—if proof were needed—that British troops do not recognise defeat even if it stares them in the face, as it did many times during the retreat to the Marne.

After the fall of Namur on August 23, 1914, Mons was obviously the next point of importance in the path of the German advance, and so, on the same day that saw the fall of Namur, the enemy attacking in great strength, forced our 2nd Corps, holding the line of the Condé Canal encircling the town, to fall back and abandon their positions. Lying as it does on the main line from Paris to Brussels, with a line also running towards the eastern frontier through Hirsons and Mézières and a branch line to Laon and Chalons—this latter place being to the French Army what Alder-

shot is to the British—Mons was a most important centre.

The capital of Hainault, Mons had a population before the war of some 29,000 inhabitants, and lies near the centre of the most important of the Belgian coal-mining districts. It was here that, on August 23, 1914, the British Expeditionary Force had its first great trial of strength with the German hordes. During the enemy occupation Mons was used as a sort of advanced base hospital, and quite a lot of our men who died from wounds were buried in the cemetery there.

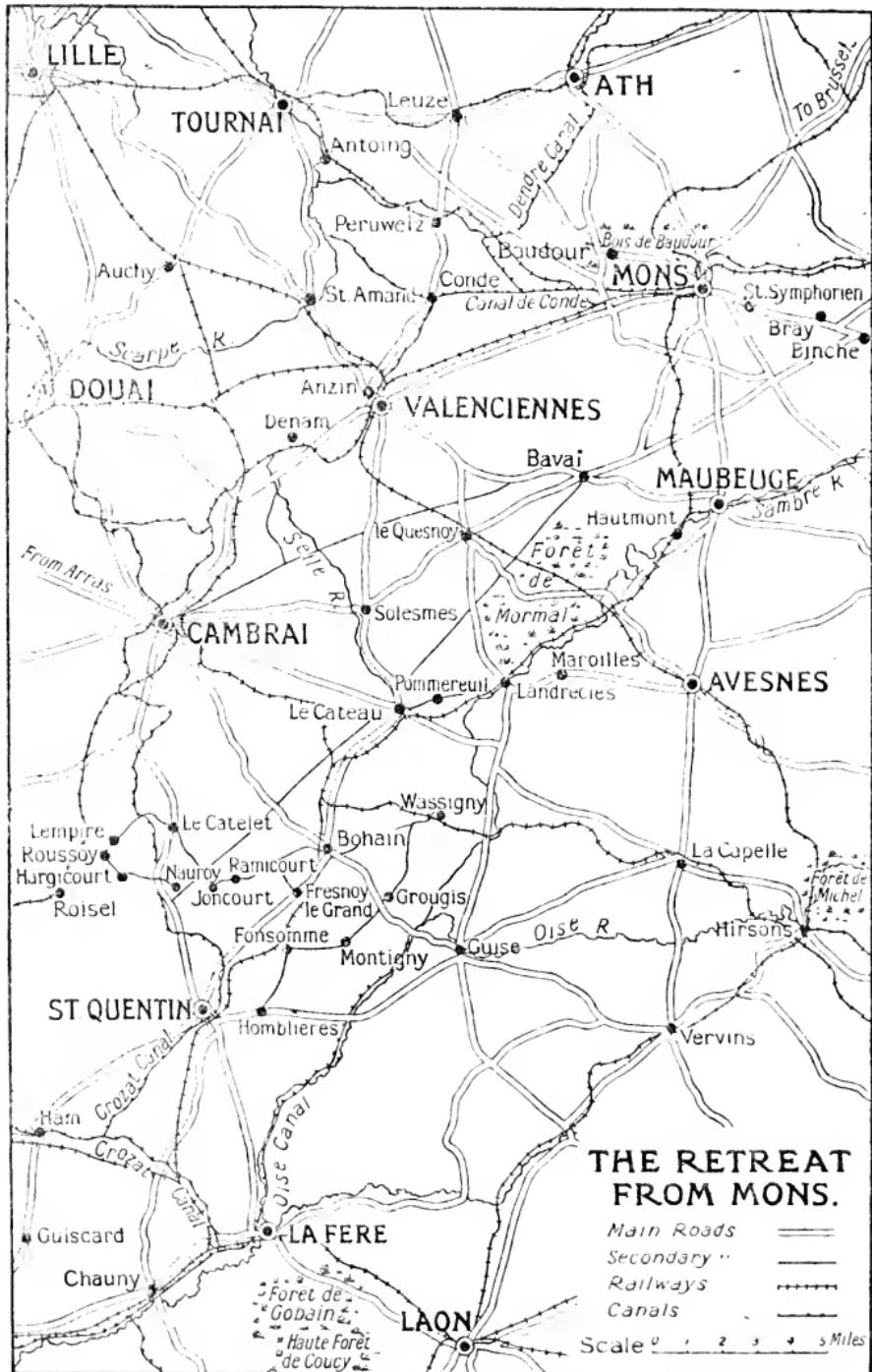
To reach the town from the northern part of the front, such as Bailleul, the best route is through Armentières—Lille—Tournai, and then taking the Ath road turn south just after going into Leuze and down through the Bois de Baudour. Personally, I should wait until Arras had been thoroughly inspected, and then take the long straight road which goes direct to Cambrai—called by the Germans the “Romerstrasse.” This road continues after Cambrai, and should be left at a little village called Villers-en-Cauchies, in favour of the Valenciennes road.

From Valenciennes the road on to Mons runs almost parallel with the railway, which it crosses just before reaching the town. Looking this route up on the map the reader may consider it rather a long way round, but I recommend it because of the fact that one may be able to see more of the enemy organisation of their lines of communication. Motorists will be able to revel in the long, straight stretches, and,

more important still, this road is in very good condition, owing to the fact that it was, in conjunction with the railway, one of the main arteries of supply for the enemy lines on the Western Front.

Coming out of the town of Mons on the eastern side and taking the road to St. Symphorien on to Bray and Binche brings the tourist to the district in which our cavalry patrols engaged the enemy and "held their own well." As a matter of fact, it is established beyond doubt that our cavalry, not only here, but at any other place where contact was made with Germans, very much more than held its own. Quantity, not quality, was the sole reason that British cavalry, instead of advancing, had to fall back.

A good road takes one down to Bavai, which place is interesting from the fact that here would have been found General French's Advanced Headquarters on August 24. Bavai is just north of the Forêt de Mormal and on a straight road to Le Cateau, in which town was the *pukka* G.H.Q. during the critical stages of the retreat. During the retirement to the south-east of Condé by the 2nd Corps, some very stiff fighting occurred, the brunt of it having to be faced by the 5th Division. Here again the cavalry—Hussars, Lancers and Dragoon Guards—came to the rescue and harassed the enemy's flanks with such success as to hold up their advance and enable our hard-pressed troops to fall back in good order. Every inch of the ground in this district has been stubbornly fought for, and many of the "Old Contemptibles" fell whilst covering the retirement of their comrades, and



the 1st Corps—under the command of General Sir Douglas Haig—received high praise from the Commander-in-Chief for the brilliant work they did on the morning of August 24, 1914.

Avesnes, which is reached by a direct road almost due south from Maubeuge, was the headquarters of General Sordet's French Cavalry Corps, but newly arrived from adding to its laurels by most brilliant defence work with our Belgian Allies in the opening days of the German offensive. From Avesnes westwards through Maroilles we get to Landrecies, and thus on through Pommereuil to Le Cateau, which, as I mentioned before, was British G.H.Q. An exceedingly interesting part of the old line was this from Avesnes to Le Cateau, for both at this latter place and at Landrecies the British troops put up a stiff fight.

Le Cateau is a small town of—before the war—some 10,000 inhabitants, and was principally noted for its woollen mills. Standing as it does, and being the junction of several important roads, as well as on the main line to the French capital, it had a certain strategic importance, which no doubt led to its being chosen for G.H.Q. It was during the night of the 25th that Fritz bit off a little more than he could chew and got bitten in turn by the British bulldog. Pushing up troops through the Mormal Forest he violently attacked Landrecies and got badly trounced by the 4th Brigade (Guards), commanded by Brigadier-General Scott-Kerr. The Guards—as one of their number described it afterwards—“had a regular picnic,” and actually

killed over 800 Germans by machine-gun and rifle fire in a very short time. Le Cateau was the scene of the much-criticised but magnificent stand of the 2nd Corps under General Smith-Dorrien, who was advised to retreat, but preferred to fight. Whatever critics may say, and whether the decision to remain and fight was right or wrong—who can deny that the battle of Le Cateau added another glorious page to the history of the nation? And the story of the guns at Le Cateau—who has not heard of it?

Following the line of retreat down through Bohain, it would not be a bad idea to branch off and take a quick survey of the country both east and west of this place, calling at Le Catelet on the west down through Lempire, Roussoy, Hargicourt, Nauroy, Joncourt, Ramicourt, and working over through Fresnoy le Grand to Wassigny, then afterwards bearing south again through Grougis, Montigny, Fonsomme, Homblières, into St. Quentin.

It is more generally understood that General French had an idea of making a stand on the Somme south of St. Quentin, a project which he abandoned owing to the “shattered condition of the troops, which had fought at Le Cateau,” so the retreat continued in the direction of the line, La Fère—Noyon, to which latter town G.H.Q. was transferred on the 26th. Here and there—by the roadside or, possibly, just in a corner of a wood or orchard—sometimes in the middle of a field, silhouetted against the evening sky, may be seen little groups of weather-worn crosses, two or three together, perhaps one isolated

a few score yards away. Examination, as a rule, reveals that they mark the graves of men of our gallant Old Army who fell during the retreat. Many of these isolated crosses are to the memory of cavalry-men who sacrificed themselves to save heavier disaster, simply and whole-heartedly doing their duty, asking not the reason why. Hardly decipherable some of the names were the last time I saw them in August, 1918; the crosses overgrown and green with moss and lichen. Since then, however, a lot of good work has been done by the Graves Registration; the country has been scoured from end to end, the crosses numbered and re-named, and everything made ready for the day when, as I understand, all isolated graves will be opened, and the remains reverently carried to the big memorial cemeteries which are being arranged in many districts.

As I have noted before, the enemy, with all their faults, seem to have a certain amount of respect for the dead. Many of their cemeteries show that great care and attention has been paid to the French and British dead equally with their own. One cemetery in particular, near Boisieux-au-mont, off the Arras—Bapaume road, was exceptionally well cared for. French, British, and Germans lay side by side, each grave with an elaborate cross and marked out with box-edging, paths carefully tended, and the whole place planted with flowers. At the far end a huge cross had been erected, constructed out of tree trunks, with an ornate carved wood tablet to the memory of the fallen.

However—to continue with the Retreat—on Aug. 26 G.H.Q. moved to Noyon, a town which is well worth visiting, and which is on the direct road through Ham and Guiscard, a picturesque route all the way until one arrives at the old town of Charlemagne—a piece of sculpture to the memory of whom used to be in the market-place, and may be there yet, although I believe the Boche knocked the place about very badly in 1918, setting fire to the Cathedral about two days after my own people evacuated the town in company with the French 75's. Noyon was noted for two things when I got there first—one was the excellent hotel, and the other the paper shop in the market-place, presided over by Mdlle. Louise and her mother. Mademoiselle was a most attractive person and knew it, and the shop presently became a sort of daily rendezvous for certain Staff officers, who apparently had nothing better to do; so that it became, in time, somewhat of an ordeal to face the assembly of “brass hats” in order to make one's modest purchase of the *Daily Mail*—two days old—or a packet of letter-paper and envelopes. I wonder if madame and her charming daughter managed to get away safely before the Boche arrived?

On the 28th G.H.Q. was moved from Noyon to Compiègne, and remained there about four days. A direct and picturesque road leads from Noyon to Compiègne through Ribecourt. The roads through the once Royal Forest of Compiègne are charming, and this place in itself is well worth a short stay. Excellent accommodation may be obtained in the

town, which, for a long time, was a most important French Headquarters. There is an excellent hotel, which has quite a Parisian savour, and which would make a very handy temporary headquarters, from which the country in the direction of Soissons, Villers-Cotterets, Crépy-en-Valois, Senlis, and Clermont could be explored. There is a splendid road from Clermont down to Creil, then on to Senlis, and across country to Villers-Cotterets, where an important rear-guard action was fought on September 1, the same day that "L" Battery immortalised themselves at Néry, fighting heroically against overwhelming odds. The day before this G.H.Q. had gone to Dammartin, and on September 2 went to Lagny, and on September 3 to Melun.

September 5 saw the end of the retreat from Mons, and preparations in full swing for the forthcoming crushing defeat of the German hosts in the First Battle of the Marne—a battle which, in spite of the fact that the war dragged into another weary four years, was the deciding point of the whole affair. Had the Battle of the Marne ended in a defeat for the Allied Forces, there is little doubt that Paris would have fallen—a catastrophe from which, I believe, France would never have recovered. To turn round after a retreat, in some parts very disorderly—especially after the 2nd Corps' stand—and deal such a smashing blow at the enemy, reflects the greatest credit on troops who had been enduring hell on half rations, sometimes no rations at all, for fifteen days.

During the period when the B.E.F. was moving

up from the Aisne district to Flanders, I met a corporal of the 3rd Worcester Regiment, who kept a rough diary of the retreat as it appeared to him. There are so many human notes in it, that I think it is quite worth reprinting here.

"Disembarked at 9.55 p.m., slept in the sheds at night, left for the train at 7.30 a.m. Sunday, August 16, at Rouen station, and left for Aulnoye at 11.35 a.m. Stopped at a station, Abancourt, at 3 p.m., where they (the French) provided us with cigarettes; they were very good to us. We then left for Bifur at 4.30 p.m. We were greeted at all stopping places. We then went on to St. Quentin, arrived at 8.20 p.m., and all the population turned out to see us (the unknown quantity or quality as the case may be). We went on to Aulnoye, detrained, and stayed three days, when we went through our usual routine work. Thursday, 20, Réveillé sounded at 5.30 a.m. After cleaning up our various sleeping places, and having breakfast, we fell in at 9 a.m., and marched to Dompièrre, arriving at 10.30 a.m.; distance about four miles. Detailed at 6 p.m., we billeted in barns, etc. Dompièrre is a large and very pretty place. We visited the Roman Catholic church here. At the request of the population of Avesnes (about seven miles from Dompièrre) the English troops were taken on a route march to that place (Avesnes). We were everywhere greeted by all in a very hearty manner.

"Friday, August 21.—Réveillé sounded at 2.30 a.m. Breakfast at 4 a.m. Parade at 4.45. The whole

Brigade left Dompierre and marched through St. Austin, Wattigmes, and reaching the coast, marched towards the Belgian frontier, passing through Limont Fontaine, St. Reminal Hautmont, and billeted at Feigniers, reaching there at 2.30 p.m., having marched twenty-one miles. The frontier is three miles from here.

*“Sunday, August 23.—We took up position and put obstacles; fighting started at 4 p.m. We entrenched ourselves along the railway, and pulled up some of the lines. Firing ceased about 7.30 p.m. No sleep.*

*“Monday, 24.—Fighting commenced about 3 a.m. We retired about ten miles, losing fifteen killed and about eighteen wounded. The Germans lost thousands of men. Most of our men were killed by artillery fire; very few were killed by rifle fire. The Middlesex lost 600 rank and file. Took up position, and put outpost out. No sleep.*

*“Tuesday, 25.—We opened fire at the enemy about 3 a.m., and continued fighting until about mid-day; killed, one officer and two wounded. Six Germans blew up the village close by us; the women and children were lying dead and wounded, with their heads and legs blown away by shell fire. We retired, and marched until Wednesday morning. No sleep since 23rd.*

*“Wednesday, 26.—We were waiting for the enemy to advance, when we were informed that our position was not suitable for our General’s plan. We were moving forward in single file, when the Germans*



opened on us with rifle fire, and men fell. We returned their fire, and as usual the accuracy of our fire caused them to retire. Another forced night-march, in which we had to be extra careful.

*“Thursday, Aug. 27.—After an hour’s rest (4 a.m. to 5 a.m.), we carried on with the march, and continued the march which will go down in history as one of the finest accomplished.*

“From Monday midday till Thursday, distance about 130 miles, with a rest of one hour *only*, and having no food from Sunday until Thursday; we couldn’t get anything except apples, pears, carrots, swedes—this is all we lived on. Received great praise from Smith-Dorrien for this.

“Marching all day Saturday and Saturday night, blowing up all bridges we passed over, a few well-placed shells doing the trick; we had two hours’ rest on Sunday morning (4 a.m. to 6 a.m.), and then continued the march to Vic-sur-Aisne. We stayed in a brewery for the night, and heard that the French had held the enemy back. We were well looked after here, having plenty of wine and beer, with which we filled our bottles before we marched.

*“Monday, August 31, 1914.—Marching to Vic-sur-Aisne, we arrived at 5.30 p.m., about forty miles. We had a good reception there, and billeted in a wine manufacturing place, we had plenty given us to drink. No sign of the enemy that day.*

*“Tuesday, September 1, 1914.—We left Vic-sur-Aisne and marched south, starting at 5 a.m., and arrived at the boundary of a small village. We had*

to turn back three or four times owing to German patrols; this force numbered 1,000, but the French have captured 600, leaving 400, who are behind our lines. Our artillery has fired all the woods. We arrived here at 7.30 p.m.; twenty miles.

*“Wednesday, September 2, 1914.*—Marching out of camp at 2.30, we put outposts in position, drawing them in at 5.30, when we left for a place near Paris—fifteen miles—and did outpost duty until 5.30 p.m. Came in from outpost and cooked dinner; had a wash and shave, which made us quite fresh. Our reason for the precaution of outpost was the fact that there were a number of Uhlans who had strayed and were lost. We went out at 7 p.m. for all night outpost duty.

*“Thursday, September 3, 1914.*—We retired from outpost at 5 a.m., and marched through Meaux; after we had passed, the bridges were blown up. We marched on about three miles, then halted for dinner and two hours' rest. We enjoyed ourselves fine in a huge fruit plantation, where we helped ourselves, filling our haversacks; continuing the march to a village named Sancy, arriving at 6 p.m., we were settled at 7 p.m., and cooked our supper. When a German aeroplane came over, the troops were ordered to open fire on it, bringing it down in a field three miles away. Our cavalry went out and secured it.

*“Friday, September 4, 1914.*—We got up at 6 a.m. and cooked our breakfast, and received orders to stand to, not being able to leave our arms; this continued until dinner, and we were still awaiting orders

at tea-time. Immediately after tea we received news that the Russians had captured a force of Austrians 75,000 strong and 150 guns, at a place near Lemberg. This news was given to us by the Commanding Officer, Colonel Stuart. About 6.15 p.m. an Austrian aeroplane came over our camp; the troops were ordered to fire, but with no apparent effect upon its flight. At 7 p.m. we had an issue of rum per man, which had a very comforting effect during the night. We moved off at 11.30 p.m., and marched all night.

*“Saturday, September 5, 1914.*—We arrived, and immediately went on outpost for the Brigade at 8 a.m. This was after marching twenty miles, which brought us into the Charpre district. We rested during the day, cooking, etc., excepted. We were allowed to go to a small village to obtain water.

*“Sunday.*—During one of our halts, we received a message from a staff officer saying that a force of Germans, 200,000 strong — to our five Army Corps (63,000). We were now making tracks towards them. The French are getting round them, and we are attacking their centre.

*“Sunday, September 6, 1914.*—We commenced our advance towards the north at 5 a.m., and were about sixteen miles away at 8 p.m.—at Lamontières, which some of the enemy occupied until our troops drove them out, killing a few, and capturing about 800 of them. We finished the remainder of the night in reserve; it was here that the first reinforcements joined us.

*“Monday, September 7, 1914.*—We were ordered

to stand to arms at 4 a.m., and to await orders to move off; we had breakfast and dinner, and C Company went on outpost duty, and killed four Germans, and kept their rifles, bayonets, and revolvers; took the wounded to hospital after having bandaged them. We were allowed to go into the village to buy bread. and we found a house and brewery that had been ransacked; the place had been turned upside down and in a frightful state; we left in the evening, and completed a march of fifteen miles at 10.30 p.m. The place is a very large town.

*“Tuesday, September 8, 1914.*—We stood to arms at 3.30 a.m., and awaited orders, having breakfast at 4.30 a.m. We marched at 7 a.m., continuing our advance due north until 8 p.m. On our way we passed two or three of our men killed and about eight wounded—several Germans were lying around; as a solace we had captured 500 German men and some officers (these men must be amongst the biggest of the human race); they had cut all telegraphic communication, and killed all the cattle, abused and ill-treated the women of all the villages, especially the girls.

*“Wednesday, September 9, 1914.*—Moving off at 6 a.m., we marched through a town named Vitry at 8 a.m. There were a good number of German killed and wounded, and 5,000 prisoners, our brigade accounting for 300; we also captured much of their mechanical transport, motor cars, and cycles. Crossing a wide river we met with some resistance from the enemy; they held some rising ground on the

other side. One of our regiments eventually captured a battery and some thirty or forty officers. We advanced down the slope of this ground in skirmishing order, and awaited orders from 2 p.m. until 5.30 p.m., going on outpost duty at 8 p.m.

*“Thursday, September 10, 1914.—We commenced our advance at 6 a.m. Alongside a wood we saw a German battery out of action, and about 300 men killed. I took a bayonet and bolt from the dead as a souvenir. We passed much of the enemy’s transport, which had been blown up by our artillery, and all their commissariat seems to be composed of is food they have looted from the French. They are retiring in a hurry towards their own frontier. Marching through a village we saw a church full of wounded and about 500 German prisoners, who were standing outside. My section was sent to the flank to reconnoitre a wood; we captured two Germans, and handed them over before we marched; we continued the march until 8 p.m., and billeted in an orchard.*

*“Friday, September 11, 1914.—We marched twelve miles, starting at 5 a.m., arriving at noon, billeting for the night.*

*“Saturday.—We left our billets at 9.20 a.m., and continued our march towards the enemy; a very wet day; march until 8 p.m.; we went on outpost duty, and had a wet night, all getting drenched to the skin.*

*“Sunday, September 13, 1914.—We left at 7.30 a.m. for a large town named Braine, which the enemy had only a few hours before vacated, after ransacking the town, throwing the merchandise out into the*

street, setting fire to the houses. We formed up on the other side of the town ready for attack at 10.30 p.m., and moved at 4 p.m.; we then moved to the right of the town and stayed for the night.

*“Monday, September 14, 1914.*—We moved at 1 a.m. towards the river, where the enemy had taken up position and waited for us to cross. They had previously blown up the bridges, and every time our men attempted to cross, they were met by a heavy fire from the enemy’s big guns. A good many lives were lost in crossing, and as soon as we arrived on the other side we had to take cover under a high wall, with earth on the opposite side; the enemy’s shells were bursting all around us; some lives were lost; my company escaped with two killed and three wounded.

*“Tuesday, September 15, to September 20, 1914.*—We moved at 2 p.m. to take up a position; we constructed trenches from shell and rifle fire; we did not receive any ration for two days and three nights.

*“Wednesday, September 16, 1914.*—We are still in the trenches, and the enemy have constructed defences—apparently seven lines of trenches. We are all hanging on to our positions, and I believe that a flanking movement is going on on the part of the French. They [the enemy] have tried two or three times to break through our line, and some have been cut off. These attacks commence about 6 p.m., and finish about 12 midnight. The Germans are making no headway. We are remaining here for a while.

*“Monday, September 21, 1914.*—We held our positions in the trenches until 10 a.m., when we were

relieved. The Leinsters relieved us. The regiment has been in the firing line just one month. After leaving the trenches we retired to a village near the river.

*"Tuesday, September 22, 1914.*—We arrived in our camping ground at 7.30 a.m., and cooked our breakfast and dinner there, moving off again at 3.30 through a village, and took up outpost duty during the night. Three companies were on outpost, four billeted, and one company was changed daily. You will note that this outpost was behind the firing line, being so placed to protect supplies sent along the line. We retired into the wood in the daytime for cover.

*"Thursday, September 24, 1914.*—We are still in the same position, and remain here until further orders. Our firing line is now on the other side of the river from Braine; this is the position which the French held for seventeen days in 1870. It has been in our possession since September 13-14. We left at 5 p.m. and marched to Braine, where we billeted for the night at 10 p.m. and stayed for a few days to recuperate, and then joined the General Reserve.

*"Tuesday, September 29, 1914.*—Had breakfast, and had a general clear-up after breakfast; we then heard some of the latest news—of the Germans losing heavily. We also heard that Pte. ——, of the —— Regiment, was shot for cowardice on the 26th inst. Running away from the firing line. I have to go into Braine with twelve men for guard at the Divisional Headquarters. We parade at 4.45 p.m.

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*“Thursday, October 1.—We moved from our billets at 3 a.m. and marched into the village on our left, to protect supplies.”*

In fifteen days the B.E.F. fell back no less than 130 miles, fighting a rearguard action all the time. The casualties, more especially at Le Cateau, were heavy, and a large amount of much-needed war material, guns, and machine-guns were lost. In spite of this exceedingly demoralising experience, we find the Army, in about twenty-four hours, and at a time when the German General Staff considered them beaten to a standstill, turning round and putting in a powerful offensive which, in a few days, advanced the front over sixty miles, and sending the enemy in headlong retreat from the Marne to the Aisne, in addition to capturing many prisoners, guns, and stores.

It is a very difficult proposition to try and point out all the places of interest on the line of retreat, and a complete survey of the ground is out of the question—even if I thought that my readers desired it; so that I have contented myself with following as nearly as possible what might be called the centre of the line of the retreat from Mons downwards. This line, as will be seen from the map, is roughly as follows: Mons, Bavai, Bois-le-Eveque, La Fère, Noyon, Forêt de Gobain, Braine, Villers-Cotterets, the Marne. The traveller who is really interested, and cares to go to the trouble, can find plenty of people in the villages for some miles around the places I have named who will be able to describe their own

localities in detail, and point out places of interest, and the burial places of those who fell in 1914. The most difficult district to conduct investigations with regard to 1914 fighting will be, undoubtedly, that section of the line which extends from Ribecourt and north of the Aisne to Berry-au-Bac, which was debateable land for such a long time in the hands of the French. From La Fère up to Mons is a much simpler matter, as the war affected this part very little after the first German rush in 1914, for it remained in the hands of the Boche and was well behind the lines until the beginning of the big retreat in 1918.

## SECTION VII

### **From the Chemin-des-Dames to the Marne, 1918.**

#### THE CHEMIN-DES-DAMES

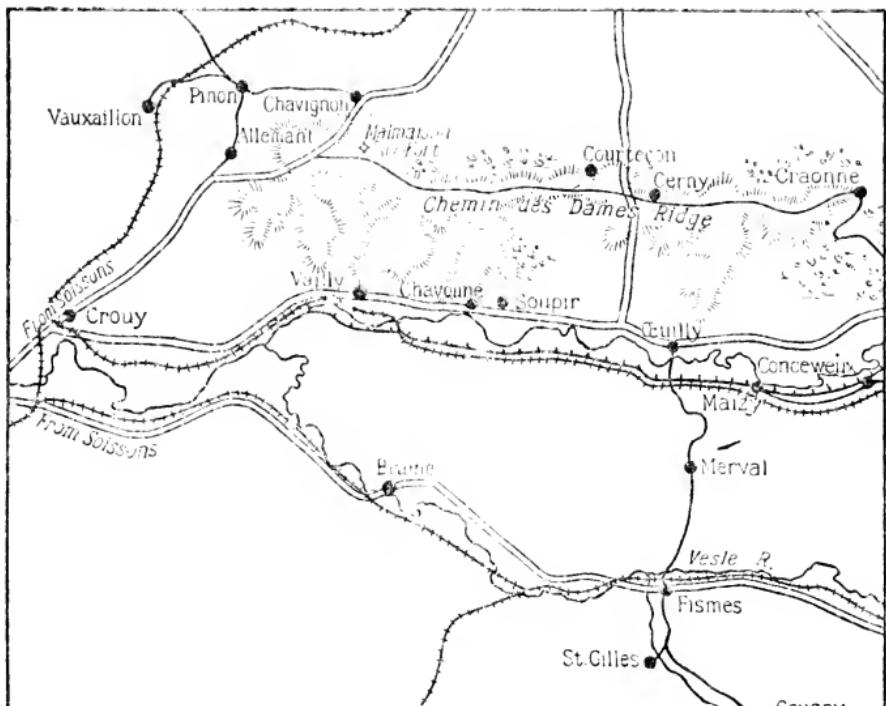
POSSIBLY the most dramatic phase of the whole war was the one which was ushered in with the morning of May 26, 1918, by the Crown Prince's overwhelming attack on the Allied front between Soissons and Rheims, when the famous and bloody Chemin-des-Dames was again taken by the Germans, and the second retreat to the Marne began—a retreat which only finished after Château-Thierry was captured and the apex of the enemy salient was well across the Marne.

The Chemin-des-Dames, as the road between Allemant—north-east of Soissons and now simply a heap of grass-grown ruins, and Berry-au-Bac—is called, runs through what is nothing more or less than a huge graveyard. Fighting almost as fierce as that which took place at Verdun celebrated the end of July and the first weeks of August, 1917. On this plateau the German dead and wounded have laid in their thousands, and the French losses, though not as heavy as those of the enemy, were heavy enough in all conscience. Since the time our “Old Contemptibles” fought over this ground in September, 1914, British troops had not again been in the lines

so far south until four divisions were moved down there on the right flank of the French in May, 1918.

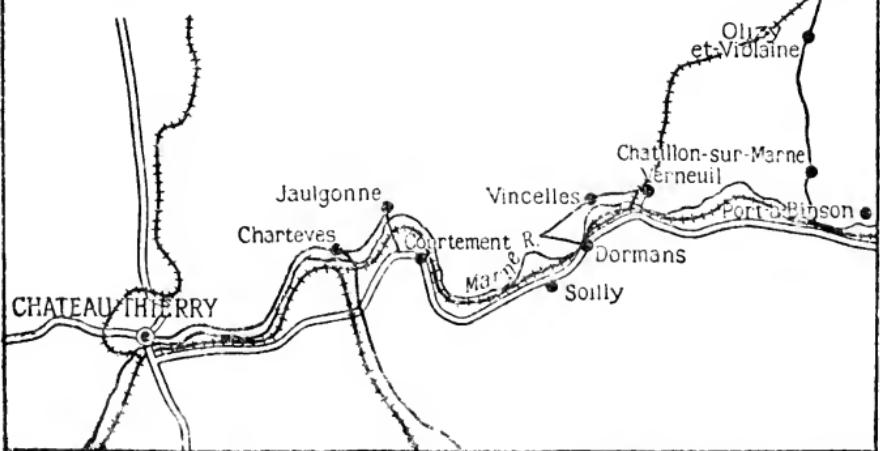
In September, 1914, the 1st Corps confronted the Germans, very strongly entrenched, along the Chemin-des-Dames ridge. In those days the woods were much denser than they are now—after four years of shell-storms—and the fighting, apart from its severity, was very patchy, many units being unable to keep in touch with one another through the wooded country, which resulted in several narrow escapes for certain of the brigades and divisions engaged. The 3rd Division, for instance, was extricated from a very dangerous corner by the cavalry, and instead of being surrounded and cut off managed to beat off the German attacks, and finally consolidate a position which ran from near La Bovelle Farm and Cerny, on the high ground, down through Troyon, Chivy to Soupir at the bottom of the slope, and then on to the Chavonne—Soissons road. To this position they stuck tenaciously for nearly three weeks. During the action of September 14, 1914, the 1st Corps not only inflicted heavy losses on the enemy, but captured over a dozen guns and some hundreds of prisoners.

To visit the Chemin-des-Dames battlefields, Soissons should be used as a starting place. Taking the road which leads out of the town by the Faubourg St. Médard the route is through Crouy; from there past what once used to be a sugar factory—at the cross-roads about three miles out of Crouy—and then on till the Chavignon turning is reached. Here the northerly route is taken, and about a mile farther on



## CHEMIN DES DAMES TO THE MARNE 1918.

Main Roads      ———  
 Secondary.....      ——  
 Railways.....      ·····  
 Canals.....      .....  
 Scale      0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles



the remains of Allemant will be seen on the right-hand side of the road. Continuing on to Pinon, a cut can be taken across to Vauxaillon—if there is time—or by turning east, get to Chavignon, and from there the south-west road leads direct on to the Chemin-des-Dames with a sharp turn eastwards. Malmaison Fort lies a few hundred yards off to the left-hand side of the Chemin-des-Dames, and is worth visiting, as some of the fiercest fighting in the war took place around this fort.

The Fort de Malmaison dominated a certain amount of the plateau, and was considered by both the French and the Germans to be a point of very great strategical importance. In July, 1917, the Crown Prince delivered one of his memorable assaults on a front which extended from the fort to the woods of Chevreux—a distance of approximately twenty-three kilometres. Some 60,000 troops were launched forth against the French position after a short bombardment. The French Intelligence Department had been busy for several days, however, and knew almost as much about the forthcoming attack as the enemy did, so that when the Huns started across No Man's Land they ran into a veritable tornado of French shells, a barrage so beautifully regulated that, with the exception of one or two sections, the enemy were practically wiped out before they got half way across; those who did arrive at the French front line were received with bomb and bayonet, and the result of the attack was an enormous loss of men by the enemy and an advance near Cerny by the French.

Between Malmaison Fort and the mill at les Bovelles there is a little hillock which was called "The Panthéon." It was in this position that the French troops—mostly Chasseurs—put up a fight which will go down in history as one of the most heroic of the whole war. Time after time did these gallant men repulse the German hordes—which heavily outnumbered them—and after about twenty hours' fighting remained masters of the position. Many of the brave defenders were killed, but the ground around "The Panthéon" was literally covered with dead and dying Germans; "in one place bodies were lying on top of one another so that they constituted in themselves an additional parapet," so one of the defenders writes in a letter to his mother describing the fight. Heroes all, these French Chasseurs, magnificent both in attack and defence. The Ladies' Way might well have been renamed that day the Way of Blood.

Many and many a fight has taken place along the slopes of this ill-omened ridge, and from Allemant to Craonne our Allies have fought it inch by inch until, as at Verdun, the Hun, after losing many thousands of men, finally gave it up in despair, and left the French to hold the dominating position for many months. It is estimated by a competent French authority that in the battles which took place for the Chemin-des-Dames ridge in June and July, 1917, that the German armies under the Crown Prince lost in casualties over one hundred thousand men, and at the end of that time had gained nothing of the least importance to show for it.

After the retreat from Mons in 1914 it was not until May, 1918, that British troops were called upon to take up their positions in the line on the Chemin-des-Dames, and then the 9th Corps, which made such a brilliant reputation in Flanders, took over the line on the right of the French between Courtecon and Berry-au-Bac. The divisions engaged were the 21st, 8th and 50th, and the 25th was in support.

There has been a lot of criticism in connection with our withdrawal from the Chemin-des-Dames positions, and no doubt many things happened which should not have happened. But any war—great or small—can provide similar instances. It is but fair, however, that the public should thoroughly realise the actual facts. First of all, the divisions which I have named had suffered very severely indeed in various parts of the line since the beginning of the breakthrough on March 21, 1918. They had suffered to such an extent that they had been picked out specially for a rest in a quiet part of the line. The *quiet* part of the line chosen was the Chemin-des-Dames, or a portion thereof, and very glad the divisions were to get down south for a time, miles away from the northern inferno. It should also be realised that a division which has been engaged in heavy fighting for some weeks sustains proportionately heavy losses, and to replace these losses in 1918 was an exceedingly difficult matter. The reinforcements, when they did arrive, were of the latest classes, trained—and very well trained too, to a certain extent—at home. Practically all the drafts were composed of youngsters who had

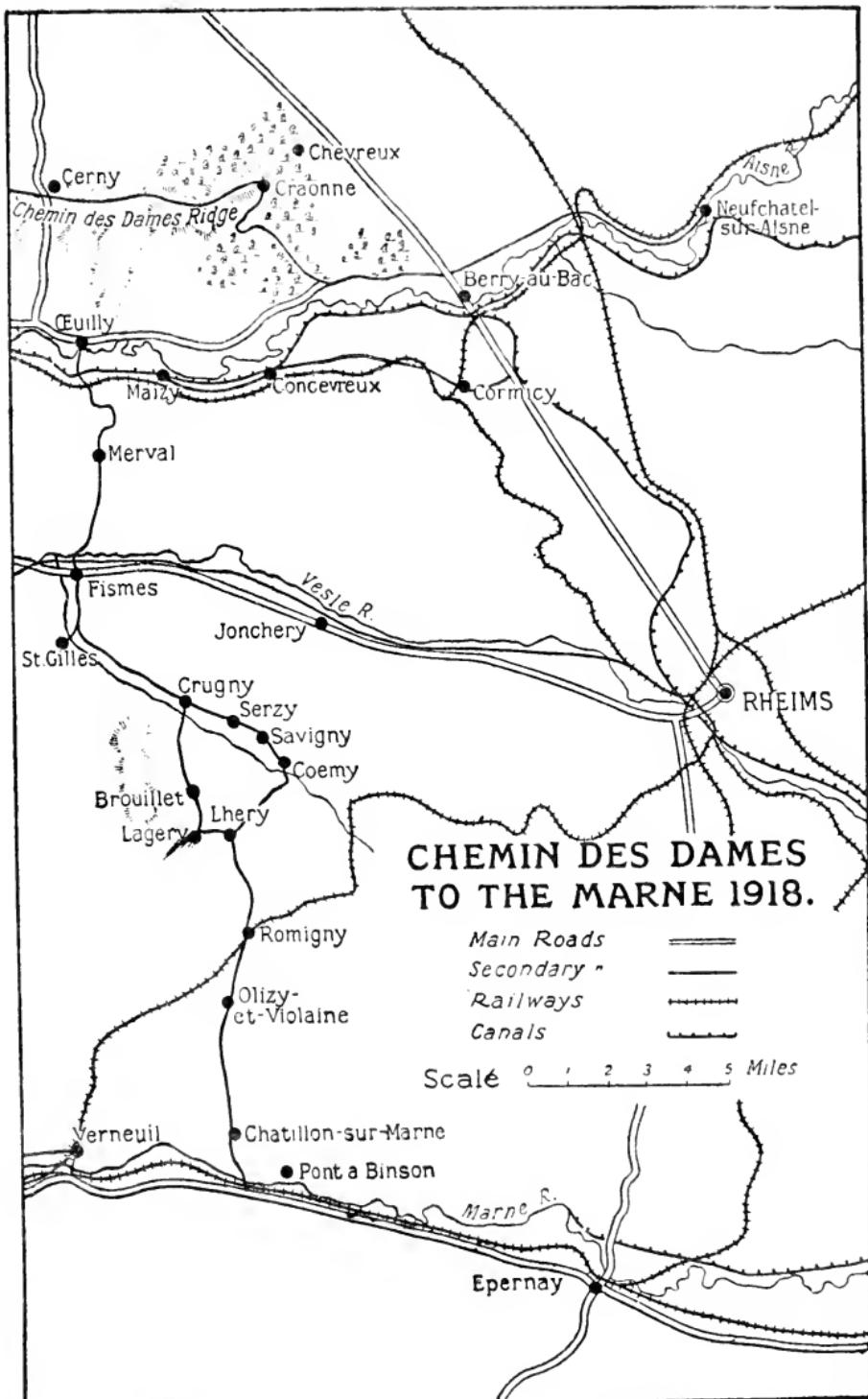
never heard a shot fired in anger and had no more idea of modern warfare than that which they had absorbed from their instructors. To put such troops in the line and expect them to withstand the attack of a huge force, which many times outnumbered them, was asking for trouble. It is now a well-known fact that the Germans had massed a very large number of men in underground retreats quite close up to their own front line, and on May 26 this fact, as well as the knowledge that the enemy intended to attack almost immediately, became patent to our own authorities, and the well-earned rest of many survivors of the earlier fighting was rudely broken. The weather was glorious, and the men thought that they were on a real good thing. Reports brought in stated that the German front line was very lightly held. A very occasional gun could be heard, and it was quite safe to show oneself on the parapet—snipers were apparently non-existent. The next thing that happened was the arrival of a regular hail of extraordinarily well-placed shells in our battery positions—some of the howitzers had been in position but a few hours—and then—the deluge!

Our men fought like heroes, but without avail. In a very short time the enemy had reached the heavy batteries—a long way behind our original front line—and some of our guns went west. At least one battery commander died, revolver in hand, defending the guns which he was unable to get away. So sudden and overwhelming was the onrush of the enemy that the 9th Corps Heavy Artillery H.Q. had barely time

to get clear. The withdrawal to the River Vesle became general. During the rearguard fighting the Lancashires, Berkshires, Durham Light Infantry, and Northumberland Fusiliers added to their laurels by putting up a very stubborn resistance, and were the means of saving several heavy guns by holding up the enemy long enough for the gunners and Army Service Corps to get them on the move—hauled by the huge caterpillar tractors, whose maximum speed is about two and a-half miles per hour. For these caterpillar drivers I have the greatest admiration ; they would drive through anything, and on more than one occasion they have been attacked by the enemy and have beaten him off. In one case literally so, for the implement used was a large spanner, with which a hefty North-countryman brained several over-eager Huns who attempted to rush the tractor.

In their eagerness to hurry fresh troops up into the line the Huns made free use of motor lorries and in full view of our infantry, though out of effective rifle or machine-gun range. These lorries could be seen disgorging troops on to the roads at various points, whence, when formed up, they advanced into support ready to take their positions in the next forward wave. It was a most tantalising sight, and we all hoped that even one 18-pounder might come into action. Nothing in that way happened, however, as all the guns were either captured or out of action from one cause or another.

I think the best routes to follow, if the tourist intends to carry on southwards to the Marne, will be



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from Berry-au-Bac to Cormicy, then westerly to Concreux; from there along the road which hugs the southern bank of the canal to Maizy; and continue on from there till the road is crossed by the Cœuilly—Fismes road. Here a turn is made due south, down through Merval; then over the high ground down to Fismes, which was a thriving and attractive little town when we arrived there in May, 1918, and went into nice, comfortable billets, to await the arrival of our artillery, which was following by train. Fismes then possessed one hotel, near the railway station, and if this has not been smashed up—it was intact the last time I saw it, but very possibly suffered in the fighting which took place in the vicinity of the station—accommodation of a kind can be obtained. There is also a café in the main street, not thirty yards away from the *Hôtel de Ville*, where excellently cooked food could be obtained, the proprietor having been rather a well-known chef in Paris and Versailles, and who was very keen to produce specimens of the culinary art to those who could appreciate them. As might be expected, he possessed an excellent cellar, which, I am afraid, must have been pretty well looted when the Huns arrived in 1918 and made the place their headquarters for a short time.

Through the main street of Fismes runs the main Soissons—Rheims road, which, with the exception of occasional patches of very vile pavé, was in excellent condition when I last went through the town on the way to Jonchery. Rheims is less than twenty miles from Fismes, and really ought not to be missed.

Much as I wanted to see the place, I never got there ; things developed too rapidly to allow any stolen joy rides. Still, though many episodes in the long tale of the war will quickly be forgotten, the destruction of Rheims is a thing apart ; it is a crime which has struck horror into the hearts of all civilised nations. The inexcusably wanton bombardment of the cathedral—following on the pillage of Louvain—is one of those things which cannot be explained away. Heaven help any German trader who dares to show his face in the town for many years to come !

From Fismes southwards there are two alternative routes after reaching the pretty little village of St. Gilles. One is the direct road through Crugny, Serzy and Savigny and then through Coemy to Lhery, which takes one on to the main road through Romigny and Olizy-et-Violaine to Chatillon-sur-Marne. The other is to take the due south road out of Crugny, then through Brouillet into Lagery—a place which I shall not forget in a hurry, for several reasons. In Lagery there lived a most charming French Town Major, M. le Capitan Foret, and I can never thank this officer enough for his unfailing courtesy and the tremendous amount of trouble he went to in order that my men should have comfortable billets. We were actually served out with bedsteads, clean mattress covers, and pillow cases, and in the billet—which was beautifully clean—separate little cubicles and bunks for the N.C.O.'s. Everything that we could possibly have wished for—not even excepting salad and fresh butter—was supplied by this

most incomparable of Town Majors. Would that some of our own Town Majors could have taken a lesson from his book !

Captain Foret is a cavalryman, who has seen a lot of service and been severely wounded in the earlier days of the war. Immaculate in dress and in manner, a soldierly figure with several decorations, he is the *beau ideal* of a gallant French soldier, and my only regret is that I was much too busy to get in touch with him when we had to evacuate the place, and so had to leave the district without thanking him for all he did for my unit during its short stay there.

One of the things which I particularly noticed while at Lagery was the rapidity with which the infantry advance was followed up by observation balloons. To the north of the village, some two or three miles away, there is a ridge, and in the short space of one hour I counted no fewer than fourteen of these balloons rise slowly into the air. At first I thought they were our own, but inquiries made from some very weary French infantry who were falling back soon dissipated this idea, as did the shelling which took place a little later in the day.

With the exception of one—that from Lhery to Romigny—all the roads in the district between Lhery and Romigny are mere country lanes, abounding in bad turns and with one or two short but steep hills. Owing to this, the congestion which took place on these tracks during the retreat was indescribable, and to add to the confusion a covey of about twenty to twenty-five Boche planes harried the retreating troops

with machine-gun fire from a very low altitude. Many men and horses were killed and wounded, and it took us over two hours to get our transport from Lagery to Lhery, a distance of under one mile! The scene may be imagined, with all the transport, guns, infantry, ambulances, etc., etc., converging on Lhery from all possible directions—all trying to make the high road leading south.

From Romigny it is a very pretty drive down to Chatillon, and then to Pont-à-Binson, at which place the Marne is crossed. Evidences of the fighting here are all too apparent. From Pont-à-Binson the road south of the Marne should be taken, as far as the bridge which crosses the river into Verneuil; from there on to Vincelles and Dormans—where the river is again crossed—continuing along the south bank through Soilly to Courtemont. Here it is advisable to cross to Jaulgonne; and from there it is but a short distance to Chartevés—a very pretty little spot. From Chartevés it is but a comparatively short run to Château-Thierry.

The story of the Americans at Château-Thierry is history, and those who view the desolation and destruction wrought in this once beautiful old town can reconstruct for themselves the scene of the crossing of the Marne and the recapture of the town by these brave Allies of ours.

From Château-Thierry to Epernay is one of the prettiest motor runs that could be possibly imagined, and although this latter town has been somewhat damaged by bombs, the damage is not obtrusively

noticeable. The champagne cellars in Epernay are worth seeing, especially those of Möet et Chandon, and there is also an excellent hotel—the Hôtel de l'Europe—which is an ideal place to put up at, for the cooking is perfect.

In bringing this little book to an end I should like to point out that in many cases where there has been a choice of routes I have not always advised the reader to take the best—that is, of course, looking at the matter from a motorist's point of view. My choice has always been guided by a desire to point out places which were of interest entirely from a war standpoint.

In many cases it will be impossible to take a car within half a mile or so of the point named, and even then one would have to traverse some very bad tracks to get as near as this. The question simply boils itself down to this—if you want to see the really interesting parts of the lines you must do quite a lot of “foot-slogging” over rough ground; in other words, go to a certain amount of trouble. In any case, “foot-slogging” may be tiring and bad for the boots, but it is excellent for the liver and a much finer *apéritif* than one can get out of a bottle. After a day or two trench hopping and dodging shell-holes an appetite will be created that would appreciate even bully beef and biscuits. Ask Thomas Atkins!







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